

STELLA NASH

BY "GANPAT"



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STELLA NASH



“‘Ganpat’ was the sobriquet the sepoy had bestowed on the Captain when, as a very callow second lieutenant, he had been posted to an Indian infantry regiment. He was long and thin, and it would have been difficult to conceive any one more unlike the conventional presentment of the jovial, pot-bellied, elephant-headed deity of good fortune known to India at large as ‘Ganesh’ and to the Mahrattas as ‘Ganpat.’ But it was the nearest his men’s tongues could get to his real name, and so it stuck.”

—“Landgrabbing,”

Blackwood’s Magazine, 1916.

The Nagri inscription below the god’s picture is his name; pronounced “Gunput.” He is a kindly soul and even the mouse gets a meal in his shelter.

STELLA NASH

BY

“GANPAT”

(M. L. A. GOMPERTZ)

AUTHOR OF ‘HARILEK’



BOSTON AND NEW YORK
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TO

VERA DOUIE

*For much help in many ways,
this story of Stella Nash and Paul Merriman.*

“The moonflowers, the moonflowers ! when first the twilight changes
They open—grey and silver—when the stars are out arow,
And if you’d go to Fairyland and climb the Peacock Ranges
You’ve first to face the twilight and watch the moonflowers grow.”

(An anonymous poet in ‘Punch,’ 1915).

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STELLA NASH.

CHAPTER I.

VIVIAN CARTER.

CAPTAIN TAYLOR stood at the entrance of the little perimeter camp at Kissimane looking down the slope towards the river-crossing. The sun was just sinking into the tree-tops, which showed black against the cloudless sky, feathery plumes and fringes above the low surrounding gloom of the East African bush—hazy already with the shadows of coming night.

His stained and faded khaki shirt with the rolled-up sleeves above the sun-freckled forearms, the frayed ends of the khaki shorts over the tanned and thorn-scarred knees, the sparse sandy beard below the sun-reddened cheek-bones under the rather shifty red-brown eyes, all spoke of months of campaigning in the tropics. Guiltless of badge or Sam Browne belt, only the revolver which swung at his hip and the title with which the equally war-worn sentry standing beside him occasionally salted his monosyllabic remarks, gave any indication of his status.

To right and left, forty paces behind the thick thorn hedge surrounding the little camp with its patched and sun-bleached tents, its small blanket shelters, its leaf and grass huts, ran the low earth wall and the traversed

trench, with a couple of machine-guns nestling in the screened emplacements at the corners. Here and there were groups of men busy over the evening meal, and the smoke of cooking-fires hung low in the still air.

Taylor and the sentry were watching a small party of men breasting the slope towards them from the river—Indians by their turbans and their walk, though in other respects there was little to differentiate them from the sunburnt white soldiery around.

“Took it in the neck—looks like,” vouchsafed the sentry, spitting.

The approaching party, some forty men or so, certainly looked as if they had met with misfortune. Their plodding gait spoke to utter weariness: several had arms in slings, bloodstained puttees, or grimy field-dressings; some of the men carried two rifles and bundles of accoutrements; while in the centre of the little column, behind the strung-out advanced-guard of half a dozen men led by a hawk-faced Pathan N.C.O., were a dozen stretchers, each with its load.

The leading men halted as they reached the entrance to the camp, resting wearily on their rifles until the remainder came up, and an unmistakable Indian officer—the stained bandage across his face not hiding the aquiline nose, light grey-green eyes, and fair colouring of the Pathan tribesman of the Indian border—walked up to Taylor, picking out, with the Asiatic’s unfailing acumen, the man in command.

Taylor addressed him in halting Hindustani, at the sound of which the man’s face lightened. The sight of the white sentry had left him in doubt as to whether he would be able to explain things, and the “sahib” in the stretcher behind was already delirious.

“Short-’aired nigs,” said the sentry to himself; “per’aps the blurry ’un took it in the neck.” White troops in East Africa held a rather unfair belief that the Indians’ fighting qualities as displayed on that benighted front from 1914 to 1918 varied inversely as to the length of their hair.

Apparently, on the whole, the "blurry 'un" *had* taken it in the neck, judging from the information conveyed by the Indian officer. But this desirable result had only been achieved at considerable cost to the company of the 50th Punjabi Rifles whose survivors were now collecting outside the perimeter, while groups of occupants of the camp hurried up to see the new arrivals, with the curiosity born of long monotonous days of post work on lines of communication.

"The day before yesterday, sahib," said the Indian officer, "we left Mwambe, eighty men under Carter sahib. We were told of Germani patrols having been seen the day before, and Carter sahib went carefully, as is his wont. Me he sent with the advanced-guard, and we moved slowly, for the bush was thick.

"We had gone some five miles when we were fired upon by a patrol of hubshis,¹ who then fled. I desired to pursue them, but Carter sahib checked me, for he feared lest it be a trap—wherein he proved right.

"Moving cautiously, we came presently upon another patrol, and then Carter sahib halted and sent me to work round a flank. While I was seeking a way round, very heavy fire broke out to my right. It seems that the Germani had laid a trap. But, thanks to Carter sahib's foresight, the hunter was caught by the hunted, for with my thirty men I came in upon *their* rear, and we dealt with them thoroughly, so that within three hours most of them were dead. Only a very few escaped. But alas! just before the end Carter sahib was hit in the stomach, which was an evil thing for the hubshis and the Germanis, since the men love Carter sahib, who speaks Pashtu even as I do—almost as a Yusufzai born.

"When we had disposed of them we gathered up our wounded and buried our dead, and making stretchers of branches—since we had but two pukka ones—came upon our way. Unfortunately there were no prisoners to carry the stretchers, and we had but few porters, so that

¹ Negroes.

we had to carry our own, and have thus taken nearly two days to come here.

"And if there be a doctor in this place, it were well that he see quickly to Carter sahib, who I fear has but little time left to live."

As the Pathan finished speaking, the stretcher-parties moved into the camp, followed by the rest of the men—mixed Khuttacks and Yusufzais,—gaunt men with keen eyes, light, and wiry of build.

The first stretcher halted by the two officers, and the occupant—a slim white-faced figure—turned his head wearily, and looked up with dull unrecognising eyes at Taylor bending over him. The lips were twisted with pain, there were blue shadows in the unshaven cheeks, and the hands under the rough blanket writhed from time to time as the stolid-visaged orderly walking beside fanned the clustering flies from his master's face and sought to soothe him in his rough fashion.

"He bleeds no more, Jemadar sahib," said the man to the Indian officer. "But his senses have gone altogether, and he knows not even me. He speaks sometimes in his own tongue—strange words—and sometimes in Pashtu, but not to me. If there be no doctor here he will surely die this night, for his feet are already cold though his head and face are hot."

"Take them to my tent, Graham," said Taylor to a man standing near, "and send for the assistant surgeon at once. The Indian wounded can go on to the hospital."

Then sending an N.C.O. to show the Indian officer where to take his men, he followed Carter's stretcher.

The wounded man was laid gently on Taylor's camp-bed in the little tent, and as the Pathans who had carried the stretcher went out, leaving only the orderly, the Indian assistant surgeon, all that the camp could boast of at the moment in the way of medical personnel, came in.

A brief examination revealed the very hopeless state of a tiny entrance wound—which had ceased to bleed—and no exit wound. The almost imperceptible pulse and

the ice-cold limbs, the damp forehead and the blue lips, all told their own tale.

"I do not think he will live verree long, sir," said the fat assistant surgeon as he finished fastening new dressings in place. "There will be hæmorrhage internallee—no doubt. I will give him a hypodermic injection of strychnine presentlee, but he should be reported as 'dangerouslee wounded'—most certainlee."

Of that there was no shadow of doubt, and later on, as Taylor sat in the tent—dimly lit by one smoky hurricane lamp—watching the wounded man, who muttered brokenly from time to time, but seemed to recognise no one, he wondered whether the express message he had sent down the wire to the next camp, where there was a British doctor, would serve any useful purpose. The doctor could not possibly come till the following afternoon, even if the road were clear, and that was not always certain.

He sent the orderly, who had sat like a statue by his master's side, for food and rest, and also for dressing, since he was slightly wounded across the shoulder, and as the camp settled down to sleep he sat there wakeful, wondering whether the man on the camp-bed might come to his senses before he died.

From time to time the wounded man muttered to himself—sometimes half-broken meaningless disjointed sentences—sometimes swift words of command, English or Hindustani.

Taylor sat there listening idly—piecing together such parts as he could follow. Then the thoughts left the fight and turned to a girl at home. And Taylor's thought went with them, and his eyes darkened.

Then the broken monologue, sometimes faint whisper, sometimes stronger, changed again as Vivian Carter turned his head slowly, and, seeing Taylor, tried to lift it. Thinking he was coming back, Taylor bent over him to listen more attentively, but it was clear from the first words that the brain was still clouded, and there was no recognition.

"Hulloa—Monocloid, . . . know you . . . this bally country. . . . Got it horrid . . . tummy . . . knocked out . . . bit." The voice faded away again, and Taylor sat back once more. There was nothing to be done at present. The assistant surgeon would be along in another hour.

The voice began again brokenly.

" . . . Big idol . . . great stone . . . carved . . . saw it . . . how close . . . not read . . . cipher bits . . . other piece. . . . Isn't jade quaint stone? . . . yes, dear . . . promised jade necklace . . . coming home . . . find . . . ever so rich . . . old Pierre Rivecourt's papers . . . years working . . . only found key . . . last . . . going Taragurh . . . war over . . . treasure . . . Get Monocloid . . . help. . . . "

The voice died away, but this time Taylor did not sit back. He stayed still and tense, listening, and presently as the feeble voice began again he drew out a pocket-book and pencil, and from time to time made notes.

Outside was the brightness of full moonlight—vivid streaks of silver and dense black patches,—the unearthly whiteness of turned earth, the coal-black shadows cast by tent and hut and piled-up gear, and a patch of yellow light, where the fat Bengali assistant surgeon in the hospital tent was doing his best for the newly-arrived wounded by the light of a swinging oil-lamp.

The heavy silence of the tropical night lay over the camp, broken only occasionally by the soft swish of a feeble warm breeze—more continuously by the low hum of insect life—once or twice by the long eerie call of roaming beast in the bush around—and sometimes, in the stuffy little tent, by the plaintive voice of Vivian Carter talking to people invisible to the man beside him.

"Old Pierre . . . think . . . old man . . . waiting . . . writing . . . cipher and piece of jade . . . I'm so glad you like jade, dear . . . lucky stone . . . that day on the river . . . just ripping, as you always do. . . ."

The voice hushed again, and Taylor's face betrayed his impatience at the turn the speech was taking. There was something of greed in the sharp features, something about the thinnish lips and the high-bridged nose that gave the impression of a hunting animal. The lean face with the straggly beard was slightly repellent now as he bent towards the restless figure on the bed—it suggested the attitude of a jackal waiting by a dying beast eager to get to work, yet still half afraid.

“Gopal Tiwari . . . the sack . . . burning charcoal . . . fiends . . . died . . . stout old bird . . . hidden his piece in rock . . . hate Hindu temples . . . Tara-gurh . . . bad place . . . dark . . . dead eyes looking . . . stone . . . white moonlight. . . . Remember moonlight, dear . . . thing in your hair . . . like star . . . coming home soon. . . .”

Once more the voice hushed, and there was a wan little smile about the colourless lips as the speaker drifted out of reach again on God's own chloroform that comes when pain is past all bearing.

Then the tide swept in anew.

“Copies of papers . . . worked every . . . cipher key . . . get two pieces jade now . . . find one . . . other two . . . Nawab Badulla's amulet . . . Rao Sawant . . . Pierre's piece . . . my piece . . . round neck still. . . .”

The damp hand crept up from the blanket to the sunburnt neck, and Taylor noticed a little gold chain that he hadn't remarked before.

“Sleepy now . . . dear . . . you punt . . . home . . . going . . . laze on cushions . . . like . . . you polishing . . . awfully sleepy. . . .”

The voice ceased, and the head nestled into the pillow. There was a step outside, and the assistant surgeon entered again to busy himself with the wounded man.

“The pulse is weaker, sir ; I do not think he will last till the doctor comes. No doubt there is much hæmorrhage internallee.”

The assistant surgeon slipped the blankets back, and

the wounded man looked at him uncomprehendingly. Then he turned his head towards Taylor.

"Still there, Monocloid . . . why . . . got beard ? . . . Red beard too . . . been Mecca ? . . . Mecca . . . café . . . had tea . . . dear . . . so tired. . . ."

The dull eyes closed once more, and there was silence.

"Do you think he will get properly conscious again, Babu ?" asked Taylor in a low voice.

"Perhaps. We cannot say. Sometimes they just die quite quietlee ; go off without coming-to. I will come again later, but there is nothing that we can do."

The worthy Bengali, looking like an overfed Boy Scout in his khaki shorts, went out of the tent again to his work in the hospital, a ponderous figure, but one whose ministrations were balm indeed to many wounded men that night for all his ludicrous appearance.

The muttering voice had died to a faint, faint whisper now, and try as he might Taylor caught nothing more save twice the word "Taragurh," and once something about "treasure." Then the girl came back, and took undisputed possession of the clouded brain as its owner slipped farther and farther out on the receding tide to a land where pain is not.

The Pathan orderly returned a little later and sat by his master's bed, wiping the damp brow from time to time, and once stilling the hands as they writhed feebly in a passing paroxysm of pain.

Towards morning Taylor went round the camp, and when he entered the tent again in the greyness of the growing dawn the end was clearly very near.

The first light of the true dawn showed above bush and tree—all dark and unfriendly like the woods of Broceliande—when the wounded man opened his eyes for the last time. His lips were bluish-white and the unshaven cheeks were void of the least vestige of colour, but there was great gladness in the eyes that looked on some one whom neither Taylor nor the gaunt Yusufzai might see. Some one who stood there in the dawn light with welcoming eyes and lips, a vision of beauty

to a lonely man—for all that a week before in a hospital in France, with the drone of the retreating Gotha's engines dying in the night air, reverent-handed rough men whom she had nursed had carried the slim form with just the single smear of blood under the cloudy hair from the wrecked hut to the mortuary tent.

“Coming, sweetheart—what a topping morning!” And Vivian Carter went hand in hand with his lady into the glory of the breaking day—a day with no shadow of night to mar it ever.

Some hours later, after Carter's blanket-swathed body had been taken over to the hospital to await the evening, when it might be finally laid to rest, Taylor was busy in his tent packing up the dead man's things from his scanty bedding-roll. Taylor was nothing if not methodical, and he had made out a list of the few possessions that were worth sending on which he intended giving into the Indian officer's charge when he and the other wounded went down the line.

The usual belongings—a wrist watch, a silver cigarette-case, a pocket-book with certain letters from some one who, though Taylor knew it not, would never read them again, since she and the man they were written to had passed the stage when letters are needed. A few other little items completed the list, which Taylor signed and addressed to the O.C. of the dead man's regiment.

But two items did not figure on the list, and if—which was probably doubtful—any one except their late owner and a girl recently in France knew of their existence, they would have taken no great notice, since neither were articles of any intrinsic value compared to the money and the other things so meticulously and carefully packed and recorded by Captain Taylor.

One of the unlisted items was a bundle of much-thumbed papers, covered with pencil notings, and headed—

“Copy of Pierre Rivecourt's manuscript.”

Attached to these were a few odd papers, evidently attempts at working out the code in which Taylor found later much of the record was written.

The other item was a rectangular piece of carved jade, which had been taken from the little leather bag that hung from the gold chain round the dead man's neck. But the chain itself was where it had always been, and from it still hung the bag which the Yusufzai orderly tucked carefully into the worn vest as he folded his master into the rough blanket for the last time. Doubtless a charm or amulet such as he himself wore.

But as Taylor, sitting alone in his tent, put the jade ornament into the wallet where he kept his money and one or two valued papers, he looked over the list again. Then he took up his pencil and added a footnote to it.

"A small bag which contained a piece of green stone, attached to a gold chain Captain Carter had round his neck, was buried with him.—J. N. T."

In some matters Taylor was the soul of accuracy, and undoubtedly the bag had contained a piece of green stone.

Then he put away the thumbled papers, and went out to make arrangements for the burial-party.

CHAPTER II.

PAUL MERRIMAN.

THE night outside was hazy with driving mist and rain, and the wet moon showed fitfully between the storm-tossed wisps of cloud that beat up from the sea over the rolling wooded hills of the south downs as the train bore Major Paul Merriman steadily Londonwards on a windy January evening in 1920. The dimly-lit compartment which he had to himself, the flick and beat of rain on the windows, the steady chant of the metals, varied by the occasional jar and sway as the train passed over points, would have lulled him to sleep under other conditions. But his mind was intrigued with a problem, and his fancy—always a little prone to run away with him—kept whirling off into strange realms—disconnected trains of thought, half-glimpsed visions of the might-be mingled with vivid snatches of the past.

“Your real trouble, Paul, is that you don’t know what you really want. Some day you will know, and when you know then you will get it. But the getting will be hard, and I think that, though you have knocked about much in odd corners of the world and seen strange things, that you will see stranger still ere you come to the end of the quest that you have not yet even thought of beginning. You are just what my brother was in his youth, and, unless I misjudge, you will follow the same road. But I think in the end you will find what you seek even now all unknowing.”

Paul Merriman’s old great-uncle’s words were still in his ears. He could see the fine old face in the firelight

of the wood-panelled smoking-room of the little place in the Sussex weald ; the keen old eyes under the bushy white eyebrows, vivid blue still despite the eighty-five years to which the wrinkles and the snow-white locks bore witness ; the fine-cut mouth under the rather pronounced nose with its wide-arched nostrils ; the carefully-tended long white beard with flowing moustache. A typical old fighting man, who had not let advancing age lessen the care that the spick and span young ensign of Mutiny days had lavished on his personal appearance.

To sit of an evening listening to the old man discussing present-day Eastern problems, pointing his remarks with apt incidents from the lives of men long dead and half forgotten, to hear his shrewd comments on men and manners, his polished wit playing over the feebleness of our present age, his caustic but still good-humoured criticisms of those who had since filled his place if they had not inherited his mantle, was to see the years fall away again from Alan Merriman—now, alas ! the late General Sir Alan Merriman, K.C.S.I.,—some time ensign in that noted irregular corps, Meredith's Horse.

As Paul sat in the swaying railway-carriage he could visualise again the fine old man wrapped in a haze of smoke from his cigar delivering his views like a Delphic oracle, could see anew the firelight playing on trophy of Eastern mail and curved sword, ivory-hilted frontier knife and brass-bossed shield, long inlaid jezail, and clumsy horse-pistol. He saw once more the grinning tiger-heads and the long-toothed skulls that had alternately fascinated and terrified him as a child, and in later years fired him to desires of emulation when his great-uncle gave him his first rifle before he left to join his regiment in India.

“ You don't know what you really want.” Was that strictly true, Paul wondered as he sat thinking ? What did he want out of life ?

Here was he just past thirty-three, with quite a large slice of his life behind him already. What did that slice of life consist of ? The usual term of schooldays,

eighteen months at the Royal Military College, fourteen years of very happy soldiering, for all that the period had included that nightmare of 1914-18 when with his regiment he had visited half the globe. Flanders, Mesopotamia, Palestine, Transcaspia had been his Cook's tour, staged partly by that misguided lunatic William Hohenzollern and conducted by the British Empire.

Yes, he knew the world as well as ever did adventurous merchant of the middle ages. He could play the part of wandering Jew to perfection. A time at Hong-Kong before the war had given him an opportunity of visiting parts of China, and a curtailed leave in 1914 had seen him endeavouring to break new ground in Arabia.

But apart from an acquaintance with some of the lesser-known parts of the globe, a smattering of half a dozen languages, and an intimate acquaintance with three, what else had he gathered? A decent seat on a horse, a fair eye for games, a quick and accurate trigger-finger that had come in more than handy upon three or four occasions during the war.

But after all where did any of these things lead to? "Jack-of-all-trades and master of none" seemed to be his ticket. What else had he picked up in his journey? A knowledge of men? Yes; it seemed fair to say that he had that, perhaps the most useful of all his knowledge.

But with the thought of life as a journey came the inevitable corollary. A journey whither? in search of what? One ought to have some idea of that at the age of thirty, but now thinking it out in cold blood his great-uncle's criticism seemed not devoid of truth. Where was he going?

Another twenty years of soldiering at the outside. Doing the same job, playing the same games until stiffening joints and shortening wind should lay their hands upon him and replace the climbs after mountain-goat over the high snows and the ice-bound rock of the 12,000 feet levels with the methodical plodding after partridge through the stubble, and substitute the digni-

fied progress round a golf links for the exhilarating scurry of the polo-field and the feel of a good horse between one's knees as the boar breaks cover.

Was that what he wanted out of life ? To sit in a club in town and stare at the traffic outside in the intervals of reading the papers, to hob-nob with similar old fogeys of like habits, to join weird movements led by hoary enthusiasts and cranks who conceived it their mission to save the country from that vague comprehensive term, "the dogs" ?

No ; he most certainly didn't want that. But then what did he want ?

Did he want high command ? That didn't appeal in the least. Did he want to drift along as a methodical regimental soldier, each year a little more sound and a little more cautious, a little more careful with regard to new ideas, until he ceased to have any ideas at all, until he lost all identity and became a mere cog in that intricate fetish and machine, "the regiment" ?

The very thought appalled him. What in the name of goodness then did he want ? Or was he perhaps one of the unfortunates who never want anything and so never get anything or anywhere ?

He began to think furiously in the hope of rebutting his old great-uncle's criticisms which piqued his self-respect. Evidently he needed the famous little Grey Books of the celebrated Mr Pelman. "What is your aim ?" He could almost see it in letters of fire on the opposite cushions, and wondered if six guineas—or was it four for the honest soldier ?—would give him an aim. It seemed cheap at the price.

Money ? That lacked interest, since he had enough for his present needs—quite enough,—and some day he would step into the old general's shoes and take over the place in Sussex and the accompanying income, which, if not wealth according to a war-time contractor's vision, was handsome enough for any ordinary being. No ; money was not the solution.

Travel ? He'd had enough of that just for the present,

and moreover, that would only increase his wandering Jew qualifications. After all, one couldn't travel for ever. But then what was the alternative to travel? Obviously settling down. What did that mean? His brain began to function more clearly.

That meant marriage very often, a wife to be kept, perhaps children to be brought up. Visions of despondent majors with wives and large families in the hills or at home what time the despondent majors chased raiders round the frontier broke upon his mental horizon. Distinct limitations to freedom, shackling of initiative. Trammelling vistas of possessions broke upon him; remembrance of his term as quartermaster when his regiment moved from Hong-Kong, and the second in command, a rather fat and plethoric field-officer, demanded carts, more carts, and then still other carts. Thirty or so he took in the end to move his lares and penates, prams and pianos, boxes and crates and cases and casks, of china and linen, of plate and glass, boxes of condensed milk for the children, cases of Glaxo for the last baby, sewing-machines and hat-boxes, dress-trunks and toy-baskets.

No; that would be very dear even at Pelman's reduced prices for aims.

Paul gave it up and decided to do without an aim for the moment, and just carry on. Then, searching in his pockets for his cigarette-case, he felt a rough-edged waxy object which set his mind off in another direction. He pulled it out, and considered it for about the twentieth time.

It was a piece of jade, light olive in colour, pierced at the corner with a hole, through which was threaded an old and much-frayed silk cord ending in a tassel. Floss and tinsel it had been some time, although the tinsel was now rusty brown, and the once brightly-coloured green silk had faded to a nondescript hue where any hue was visible at all.

On two sides it was worked, but the third and fourth sides—for the fragment was roughly quadrilateral in

shape—were fairly smooth, and the worked edges of the two other sides ran up to the corners, and ended abruptly, as though the pattern was continued on the missing portion or portions. On the front was an intricate mass of lettering, Sanscrit or Hindi by the look of it, though hard to decipher. On the back was a series of lines making a meaningless tracing, and above them, finely engraved, was a Persian inscription, which he read as “Burj-i-Fateh—Mah-i-Ramzan.”—“Tower of Victory—Moon of Ramzan.”

Paul Merriman had not the vaguest idea what the inscription was intended to convey, nor could he see what possible connection there might be between some “Tower of Victory” and the moon of Ramzan—the Muhammadan month of Lent. Perhaps the thing had no meaning; perhaps, like himself, it was devoid of aim. He smiled at the conceit.

The lines below the writing were no more helpful. They might be a definite design, they might be the usual rather inchoate tracing with which the East delights to embellish talismans, they might in fact be just anything or nothing. The nagri inscription was possibly some invocation or charm, or perhaps a verse from one of the vedas; in its mutilated and incomplete condition it was impossible to say.

Normally he would not have worried over it twice, but the history of the thing invested it with some interest, and the quaint coincidence of seeing Persian writing on what was obviously a Hindu or Buddhist ornament was, to say the least of it, uncommon. Last but not least, it had been given to him by his great-uncle after his remarks about Paul not knowing what he wanted, and so—as inanimate objects sometimes will—it had invested itself with an importance to which intrinsically it had no claim. But just now, like Mr Pelman’s advertisement, it seemed to leer at him, saying in so many words—

“*You* have no aim in life. You just drift along much as I do. But I at least have a meaning even if

you can't read it. You don't seem to have any at all."

It was the evening before that the old general had delivered his pungent opinion of Paul's lack of direction through life. Then from a despatch-case he had produced a small sandal-wood box and extracted from it this jade fragment which now gleamed dully in the lamp-light.

"You don't believe in charms, of course, Paul—I mean in any possible connection between inanimate objects and the course of human life. Your generation never does nowadays. And yet it is an ingrained belief—superstition you would call it—with three-quarters of the human race. One thing I have noted through a rather long life, and that is that men are generally more or less right in what they affirm and nearly always wrong in what they deny."

The old man paused as he handled the piece of jade—looking at his great-nephew quizzingly as though waiting for him to make some remark. Then he continued—

"I may be getting into my dotage, but of late I have been thinking a good deal over the past. And among other conclusions that I have reached is the quite—from the modern point of view—indefensible one that this particular inanimate object—a piece of jade, neither more nor less—had a very marked and distinct bearing on the course of your grandfather's life. Whether the influence was entirely fortunate or unfortunate I am not going to hazard an opinion. But the fact remains that subsequent to his coming into possession of this, the whole trend of his life and of his character changed, and from a rather invertebrate aimless youth he became a man of deep feelings, strong ideas, and definite ambitions—in fact, a man.

"Thereafter he lived as I think we are meant to live, tasting the real emotions that make up life. He found sorrow, but he found also intense if perhaps somewhat short-lived happiness; if he groped at times in

the dark valleys, he also scaled the heights ; and when he came to die I do not think he regretted any moment of his life, and passed, convinced that he was entering a gate which should lead him again to the happiness that he had found here in some measure."

Paul remembered some of the incidents of his grandfather's life, though he had never known him : the passionate love which had been the mainspring of his life, the adventurous career along the Indian frontier, the short years of bliss with the woman he had waited for, the period of wellnigh black despair that had followed her death, and the final recovery of himself in that brief brilliant campaign where he had died in his brother's arms, the last casualty of a day whose effects kept the border quiet for half a generation.

"How did he come by it ? " Paul had asked.

"He picked it up in a small skirmish during the operations in Central India towards the end of the Mutiny. He was reconnoitring with his troop, and fell in with some rebel horse, whom he charged forthwith. Their leader, a rather noted ruffian—believed to have several foul murders on his hands,—engaged Harry and nearly cut him down, when Harry's duffadar ran him through with his lance. After the fight was over the duffadar went through the man's kit, and, finding this piece of jade round his neck, asked Harry if he'd like to keep it as a memento. Harry took it, and to me it seems as if from that day his life changed. I may mention that the man was still alive and came to while the duffadar was searching him, and although he made no effort to resist when the duffadar stripped off his weapons and some gold ornaments he had on him, he fought like mad when the man put his hand in his collar to see if he had anything of value round his neck. The duffadar—an Afridi—promptly finished him off—the Pathan at best is not squeamish over life, and in any case mutineers got scant shrift—and was very disappointed at finding

only this worthless piece of jade. I expect he hoped for a necklace of pearls or some other loot.

"That is all I know about the thing except that Harry always considered it as his mascot, and nothing would induce him to part with it for an instant."

He handed Paul the fragment, and as the younger man examined it under the light, methodically deposited the ash of his cigar in the worked brass bowl that served him as ash-tray. The general was silent for a short space, looking at his great-nephew through the haze of his cigar smoke, his keen old eyes glinting kindly as he studied the youthful face opposite. Then he put down the butt of his cigar and went on—

"I have watched you ever since you were a child, Paul, and always each time you have come back here—first from school, then from Sandhurst, and later from leave,—always you remind me more and more of my brother Harry. But so far I have waited in vain for some signs of that awakening to life which was such a marked feature in his case. Therefore I have formed the idea that some stimulus is as yet lacking, but what it is I am not going to say, although I have an idea—perhaps only an old man's fancy. But I want you to take that piece of jade and keep it by you. You don't believe in such things, I know. But it will interest me to note in such years as are yet left whether my theory about the influence of such inanimate objects has anything besides mere coincidence to support it. And in any case it should be yours. Whatever else you may think about it, you will remember that it was carried for years by the bravest—and to use perhaps rather an old-fashioned term, the most knightly—man that ever stepped, and was no less prized by the most beautiful and the most sweet-souled woman I have ever known."

The old man was silent again after that, looking into the fire. It was always a family tradition that he had been wholly devoted to Paul's grandmother—a fact to which his never having married was attributed. Cer-

tainly he had spent his life and much of his money in bringing up Paul's father and his younger brothers.

Needless to say, Paul had accepted the old jade charm, although far from sharing his great-uncle's views on its possible influence on himself. Nevertheless, he had an uneasy feeling that the old man was generally right in his theories, and knew from long experience that his views were more worth listening to than those of any one else he could think of.

That night when going to bed he had placed the jade fragment on the little table by his bed in the long low-windowed room that had been his of right ever since he was a boy, where his spare kit lay from year to year ready to receive him back from his wanderings. Probably fancy—but before he turned out the light he could have sworn that the thing was looking at him with interest, a feeling which shows that he was not so utterly devoid of leanings to the superstitious as his great-uncle's remarks might lead one to imagine.

However, here he was in the train bearing him up to town for a few days before he embarked once more for the East at the expiration of his leave. Most of his kit lay ready packed with his agents, and in three days' time he was due to catch the boat-train en route for Marseilles. Where his regiment was he didn't quite know in the chaotic state of India in 1920. The latest letters reported them in a state of glorious uncertainty at Quetta, sitting on their packed baggage waiting orders to proceed to Waziristan, or possibly Palestine or even Iraq—that high-sounding name invented or rediscovered by our leading amphibious statesman to lend an odour of romance to what is more familiarly spoken of as "Mesopot." According to the best authorities, there is really only one "S" in the word.

With the lights of the Victoria cabins breaking through the murk, he glanced again at his charm before returning it to his pocket, and once more he could have sworn that the thing looked back at him, and whispered, "You

know you don't know what you want!! Bit feeble, isn't it?"

"Oh, shut up!" said he aloud, thrusting the jade into his pocket. Then he gathered up his traps as the train slid in to a standstill, hailed a porter, and presently was in a taxi threading his way along the gleaming wet streets to his club.

CHAPTER III.

STELLA.

"WHAT a desolate-looking spot ! Fancy spending one's life there ! " said Stella Nash as she gazed through Paul Merriman's glasses at the barren rocks of Aden.

" There are worse places, and it's a whole week nearer home, you know, Mrs Nash," said Paul. " There's Perim, for instance, which you didn't see this morning, although we told you last night that we should pass it about dawn."

" When and what exactly is ' dawn ' ? " put in Colonel Charles Carruthers—better known in Western India as " Carlos." " Some vague moment that the poets babble about, isn't it ? Usually connected with something unpleasant that has to be got over : an exit from a muddy world or a cold bath, for instance. The poets frequently label it as ' pearly,' but the soldier prefers the epithet ' plurry.' An interesting case of transposition of consonants by the uneducated."

" Dawn is actually that delicious moment when you know you ought to get up and so can really enjoy going to sleep again . . . like I did this morning when the ' arky bit ' woke me to say we were in sight of Perim. She lives here and looks like it," said Mrs Nash.

It must be admitted that the " arky bit," as Mrs " Carlos " had christened the peaked-looking female who shared Stella's cabin, did look as if she had been grilled for many years on a frizzling rock. Stella, on the other hand—tall and slim, with eyes of deepest grey under slumberous lids of faultless curve, eyes that were turn

by turn dreamy or vividly sparkling, gold-shot hair of brown, skin of English rose-leaf with the faintest kiss of the sun, and arched nose just half a size too large over lips and chin that might have been the models for the Lemnian Athene of Phidias—looked as if she had never left her own Devon countryside. Which appearance rather belied her, for beside a couple of years in South Africa she had spent nearly two nursing in France, and picked up more than her share of long-range shelling and not a few bomb raids.

“You are going to do guide and show us the sights, aren’t you, Major Merriman?” she continued, turning her attention to the shore once more.

“I’ll show you as much as I remember from a few weeks in the place some years back,” replied Paul as he leant over the rail watching the P. and O. launch coming alongside.

After an uneventful run from Marseilles, and a reasonably cool passage through the Red Sea, the s.s. *Natia* now lay at anchor in Aden harbour surrounded by the usual flotilla of lighters, launches, and bunder boats, with frizzy-haired Somalis—white teeth flashing in coal-black faces—diving for coins, shrill-voiced yellow-skinned Arabs gesticulating and screaming and fighting to get their skiffs alongside, pallid Jews holding up bunches of ostrich-feathers and boxes of Turkish delight, while a boatload of impassive khaki-clad Indian sepoy with rifles and bundles of equipment made their way up the aft gangway—bound for India to the musketry or signal schools.

To one side towered up the 1700-feet peak of Jebel Shamsham, with its little white signal station, a gaunt rock cone, void of leaf or blade of verdure, rising from the tumbled heap of greyish rocks which, ringed on three sides by the sea, joins the desert on the fourth by the tiniest of sand necks.

At the far end of the harbour—a long line of mirage with some tent-like pointed white heaps that mark the Khor Maksar salt works—was the connecting isthmus

that only local knowledge prevents you mistaking for the sea, and so imagining Aden to be what it almost is—an island.

Behind them the fantastic pinnacled rocks of Little Aden sprang almost from the water's edge—splash of purple and mauve and lilac shadows above the translucent emerald green and peacock blue of the gently-moving water. Little Aden, when you reach it—if you have the misfortune to go there, either by a fourteen-mile camel-ride or by launch across the harbour—is the same bare grey rocks above the dazzling sand-dunes as its big brother of Aden proper, but sometimes from a distance it looks the most wonderful fairy palace, vivid with every hue in the rainbow.

"There's colour for you, anyway, Mrs Nash," remarked Paul, pointing to Little Aden.

"Now that really is beautiful!" she said, studying it. "But I suppose there's nothing actually there. Only the light effect."

"Just that," he replied. "You see the same thing in almost all rock and sand countries. What is the Arab saying?—'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.'"

"I like that idea," said she, suddenly meditative. "There's a lot of truth in it. Things are very largely what you choose to think them, aren't they? So much depends on the way you look at them."

"The old question of subjective and objective vision, in fact."

"Yes. But most of us have that subjective vision only we don't always use it properly. Even the 'arky bit' has it—poor dear. She thinks Aden perfect. But I understand her a little, I think."

"You think then that it is a power that every one has, a gift with a definite purpose?" Paul remarked, as the pair crossed over to the other side of the deck for a better view. Stella Nash interested him, and he liked drawing her out, for under her rather light-hearted manner she concealed a fund of thoughtful reflection, and her flow of light conversation about everything and

nothing, about the littlest details of daily life, veiled some very pleasing idealistic thoughts about the things and persons around her.

"Surely ! How very drab life would be if we could only see things in one way. View streets and houses as bricks and mortar and stone without catching a glimpse of the quiet beauties lurking everywhere. The grey and mauve of slate, the warmth of old brickwork ; why, even the quaint charm of chimney-pots against an evening sky. And think of seeing people merely as a camera might, without ever realising something of the poetry that must lie behind each one of us—however dull we seem."

"Poetry behind each one of us ? Do you really think there is ? "

"But yes, emphatically yes. Poetry, music, colour, what you will. After all, life is the work of a master artist, isn't it ; and each of us is surely intended to lend something of beauty to the whole scheme."

"And each in his different star,
Shall draw the things as he sees them,
For the God of things as they are,"

quoted Paul. "Are you a poet or a painter, Mrs Nash ? "

"Only in so far that I do try to see beauty around me wherever I am. I have realised *that much* in my life, that when things seem drab it's usually more the fault of the beholder than of the surroundings. It isn't always easy to see straight, of course, and so much depends on one's physical self, which may be tired or lonely or depressed, but the beauty is always there if only you can find the faith to call it up."

She was talking almost to herself now, leaning against the rail gazing out with narrowed eyes over the dazzling rippled waters, chin propped on two very shapely hands.

Then she came back to herself, and turned upon him laughing.

"How very serious you make me with your abstract

discussions, Major Merriman. I think you must have a hypnotic influence on my subconscious self."

"What's that, Stella? Did I hear you say that Major Merriman was hypnotising you? I hope he'll let me watch the process."

Mrs "Carlos," a tall thin woman with a pleasing snub nose under kindly laughing eyes in a freckled face, and a taste for frocks of the cretonne chair-cover pattern, joined them, duly appparelled for shore-going, topi, sunshade, and glare-glasses in her rather large hands.

"No, Mrs Carlos. Far from me the wizard part. I was merely listening to what Mrs Nash says is her subconscious self discussing the subjective view of things."

"Oh, Stella being serious, is she? Bound to happen after a series of meals next to Carlos. He always seems to egg on her upper self, the one that sees so much of the humorous in things. Then of course there comes a reaction."

"He doesn't make me humorous," retorted Stella. "He makes me critical when he gets on to his materialistic theories about life and the universe. But I'd better get my topi if we're going ashore."

"I wonder how Mrs Nash will like India," said Paul to Mrs Carlos as he watched Stella's graceful figure disappearing down the companion.

"Stella likes seeing new countries. She's got the great gift of adaptability and seems always to find something to please her in life wherever she is. She's fond of games and gaiety of all sorts, and yet she will be just as bright in the tiniest and dullest of country villages. Considering the life she's had to lead, I wonder how she's ever managed to keep cheerful. The war was a nightmare from first to last, but it did do good sometimes."

Mrs Carlos, for all her kindheartedness, could be as good a hater as Dante when she saw cause—

"Dante, who loved well because he hated,
Hated wickedness that hinders loving."

Her thoughts at the moment were back at a closed chapter of Stella's life—two years of unrelieved suffering and deception, when after the briefest engagement in 1913, at the age of twenty-one, she had married Jack Nash, met while touring in South Africa with her widowed father, a retired Indian civilian.

A clever, plausible, and—in a way—good-looking man, with a fine capacity for spending money, a series of unpleasant love-affairs, generally with other people's belongings, and many pressing debts, had brought Nash to just that transitory stage when Stella's youth and the money with which club rumour endowed her seemed the very solution to life that he was seeking.

Debonair of manner, with a large and wide experience of women, he had little trouble in collecting Stella's heart as he had collected many other things, both good and bad, that had from time to time pleased his erratic fancy.

But three months had sufficed to show him that the large fortune was the mere figment of club bar gossip. The little capital she had of her own right was soon spent, and Nash realised that he had made a very serious error. With the feeling that he had miscalculated, the half-felt affection he had at first simulated turned to something not unlike hate for one whom he now looked on as a pure encumbrance.

A final scene in early 1915—Nash's appearance in a divorce court, combined with a remarkably unpleasant episode with a husband who believed in primitive justice—had culminated in an open breach, and Stella had gone home to England to her father, now a chronic invalid.

Paul, who knew something of the story, gathered the drift of Mrs Carlos' thoughts.

"Yes ; it must have been a relief to you all when you got the news of Nash's death in '17."

"It was. I'm not naturally vindictive, but when I saw his name in the casualty lists as 'killed in action,' I felt like singing all day. I didn't see Stella much

those years, but I met her once shortly after, and it was like seeing some one who has been unexpectedly let out of prison. Of course she never talks of it all now. I think she's trying to cut the whole story out of her life."

"She does it very well, because an ordinary person meeting her would never suspect her of having had a great deal of unhappiness."

"She's proud, is Stella. She'd hate to have any one looking at her pityingly—or to confess to her dearest friend what she must have been through. But here they come."

Carlos and Stella appeared, making their way through the crowd of shoregoers now thronging the deck, and in a few minutes the party was on its way to the shore.

After half an hour spent in a feather and curio shop, where Mrs Carlos turned out the whole stock-in-trade and finally beat the man down to what she considered a reasonable figure for the sheaf of white ostrich-plumes with which to make a fan, they started for the crater, the dusty amphitheatre which holds—or used to hold before the world war sent them out into the deserts beyond Khor Maksar—the bulk of the garrison of Aden.

The Carlos occupied one ramshackle carriage and Mrs Nash and Paul the other. As they drove along the dusty road, which is fringed by the harbour waters on the one hand and by three miles of Arab cemetery on the other, Paul pointed out the more notable sights—the old fortifications, the quaint Arab dhows, the ancient dismasted hulk, smaller than any Thames steamer, which carried the original force from India that captured Aden in the early nineteenth century. Packed like sardines they must have been for their voyage across the sweltering Indian Ocean.

"And that white-edged hollow in the cliff-face, just to the right of the cleft in front of which is the entrance to the crater," said he pointing, "is—according to local legend—Cain's tomb. Somewhat of a change from the vicinity of the garden of Eden, isn't it?"

"Yes. But if one had lost the power of seeing through and beyond things, what an appalling change! . . . Nothing except barren earth all one's life—just a hopeless outlook of nothing mattering—nothing being worth while. . . . Then dying in the grey dust-haze to lie at last in that dead wall of rock!!! Whoever invented that legend had an imagination and an understanding."

She looked up at the towering heights above them—a long, splintered, jagged line of lifeless volcanic rock, and there was a little pucker between her eyes as though she was visualising something else, something that hurt her to recall.

"What do you mean by 'lost one's power of seeing through and beyond things,' Mrs Nash? You've a way of speaking in riddles sometimes."

"Well—isn't that the case, don't you think, with those who have been guilty of real wrong, of great unfaithfulness towards their own ideals? That they lose the subjective vision we were talking of, and see things only materially—rocks as rocks, and dust as dust? That must be surely the worst part of their punishment, never being able to see anything as it might be—indeed as it really is. Think of always seeing the stains and the tarnish, distrusting anything that seems fair because your vision is so accustomed to flaws and blemishes. That and the loneliness of trusting no one because you failed yourself."

"I don't know. I'd never thought much about it. But certainly that—as you sketch it—must be a dreadful punishment."

"I can conceive no worse—not even the most acute bodily suffering. Oh, but look at all those camels! How very picturesque! They might be straight from the 'Arabian Nights'! And what a gateway!"

As she spoke they were driving into the narrow entrance to the crater—perpendicular heights of weathered rock above the narrow winding cleft that pierces the old volcanic wall. Alongside of them, going in the opposite direction, was a string of camels, led by

gaunt dark desert men, the slow-pacing animals laden with sack and crate, package and bundle, and on some, veiled women, who looked at them with curious gaze. The men—small, broad-chested, keen-eyed, and swarthy—were of the Hinterland breed, quite unlike the tall fair Arabs of the Northern coast.

“Do stop and let’s see them pass,” she exclaimed; and as the Somali driver, in his spotless white clothes and clay-smeared locks, pulled up his gaily-decked little pony, she turned to watch them filing down the pass behind.

“Where are they going?”

“Out into the desert over there. Lahej, Dhala, beyond perhaps, over those far rose-coloured hills you can see on the horizon.”

And to Stella watching, it seemed that there before her was a little parable of life. The men striding along and the camels patiently plodding alongside, all ignorant of their journey’s end or even of its purpose. And those veiled women on top—following always the men they were tied to—day after day through dust and glare, dazzling sunshine and dark night—away into the far unknown.

“Just life—in a nutshell,” she murmured.

“What? The camels? Do you think they represent life?” queried Paul, who had caught her words.

“Absolutely. Life as it often is, anyway. The man with his gaze on some impossibly far horizon searching for he knows not what, or else with his eyes glued to the dusty track. The beasts doing his bidding uncomplainingly. And the woman—bound to him for all her life—just to follow—follow.”

And she was silent watching the laden camels picking their way down the steep slope among the tumbled graves to the dusty flats below, whence the road led out amid the glaring expanse of sand to the palm-groves of Sheikh Othman, and then on into the lifeless desert walled far off by the hazy mountains.

Then suddenly she came back to the present—eyes

all alight again with merriment—and waved the driver on once more.

“Subconscious me again! It really must be chained up! Here am I being taken globe-trotting in the East for the first time for ten years, and I ought to be one long babble of remarks on the quaintness of everything I see, full of interest in camel water-carts, and quick with witticisms about the local habit of covering the hair with clay. Instead of which I merely try to convert picturesque caravans into images of life. You have a bad effect on me, you know.”

“It’s mutual, anyway, if that’s any consolation to you. Only I don’t call it a bad effect. It’s an interesting one. I like trying to see the things that lie behind—not the obvious view that any one can photograph.”

“Yes. You are rather perceptive, I think. Particularly so for a man. Men as a rule run to observation rather than perception. And yet the latter is perhaps the more important quality—the finer one—if only you can keep it under and not let it hurt you, as it will sometimes. But I’m tending to the serious once more, which must be checked. Tell me something about this place. Is it really a crater, or was it ever one?”

So Paul told her all he knew of the history, real and imagined, of the dusty crater, with its opening to the sea, where once presumably the waters broke in and converted the masses of molten rock into the tumbled expanse of formless grey stone that one sees to-day. And when they caught up the others at the steps leading up to the tanks, the subconscious Stella had completely disappeared behind the gay mask of the globe-trotting Mrs Nash, all interest in the quaint Phœnician remains of a day when there must have been some kind of rain-fall in this now arid corner.

Stella was more silent than usual during the drive back in the falling dusk, when the little twinkling lights of the long line of native craft building-yards, and the reflection of ships’ lights in the placid waters, made an

echo to the sky above, already beginning to blaze with its spangled net of glowing stars.

The deep waters had passed over her indeed, and when she had emerged at last into comparative peace of soul and liberty, it was with a feeling that for her romance was gone for all time, and life held nothing more now except just the sheer pleasure of beauty, delight in scenery, in shallow surface gaiety, in the pure physical joy of games and sport. What would happen when she passed the days for these she knew not, nor dared to think.

From the black depths she had brought back but one thing, a firm belief in the essential soundness and beauty of a scheme in which she had a tiny part to play, but a part which had already seared her soul as though with hot irons, a part of suffering and sorrow that had left her for a time with every nerve and fibre of her being crushed and torn, and a mind which had seemed to her veiled around with curtains of impenetrable blackness that cut off every vestige of understanding of what it was all designed for.

Another than Stella might have gone under for all time, caught at the least straw which promised even momentary forgetfulness, sought fleeting love as an anodyne, anything to drown the insistent racking pain of those years before the war, pain that persisted, though every mental faculty seemed numbed with the anguish of it all.

But Stella was not of the make that seeks to drown sorrow in the philosophy of Omar Kháyyám. Artist in every perception, passionate of temperament beyond the average, she had still clung to her ideals, though only half-formed in the years of her girlhood. Something there must be beyond the material, inner glimpses of a spiritual something designed to utilise and transfigure every least little human feeling, thought, or action—this was her birthright, very essence of her whole being. And she had clung to it through the days and years, the sleepless nights when everything in her cried out against

her unmerited fate, clung to it when understanding itself had been buffeted into unconsciousness by blow after repeated blow.

Of religion other than a firm belief in a personal God, and in the constant connection between humanity and its Creator, in the ultimate refinement towards which humanity, despite its glaring lapses, must inevitably be tending, she had none. The comfortable, respectable, conventional religion that she had been brought up in as a girl had been burnt from her by the furnace through which she had been forced to walk, and its emptiness had been shown her by the fierce light of suffering in allaying which it could play no part whatever. And when after months of darkness she had emerged into a more normal atmosphere again, of the flimsy trapping of religion that she had taken with her to the ordeal, there remained not one little rag. A phenomenon not uncommon, and considering that intense enough mental suffering can veil the most true religion from eyes blinded with hot tears, not strange.

She had entered the arena a child—she left it a woman—but she believed that it was at the cost of her womanhood, since she had told herself that her way through life must be the lone trail, and even after the news of her husband's death she had relentlessly crushed down the desires that began to spring anew in her, since even to think of them brought back memories that stung like hot acid, of things that had made of marriage to her something unclean. Later, saner ideas had prevailed, and in the furnace of war, with its inevitable accompaniment of clean courage and self-sacrifice, she had revised again her opinion of man, but always there lurked at the back of her mind that dread of fire which haunts the burnt child subconsciously.

Now and again she had met men who—like honest Carlos, like Paul Merriman sitting beside her now—seemed of a type more akin to her ideals, and each new contact with such made her feel the more that her belief in the essential goodness of humanity, her con-

viction of its ultimate goal, were well founded, despite the inner voices which with vivid pictures of the past whispered to her that it was only on the surface such men showed true, and that underneath, ready to spring out at the least opportunity, lay the Beast, unsleeping, slimy of claw and fang, waiting only till its prey be off its guard, the Beast whose sole desire is the destruction of everything "fair and beautiful and of good report."

But nevertheless when she met such types she was glad of their company—met them still on even footing with the insouciant natural gaiety, the unaffected camaraderie which was the armour she had forged to stand between the peering eyes of the world and the black depths of horror that even now she could feel and see in those places of the soul where, as R. H. Benson says, "a man is most himself and therefore most utterly alone."

She was glad that the Carlos had been moved to Quetta, since she would see more of Paul after this short voyage, and even the few days close intimacy of ship-board had made her think that there was something essentially sane and health-giving in the society of this clean-lipped man, whose thoughts so often followed the track of hers, whose composition included so much of the dreamer despite his zest for action. And of all things, Stella most craved the companionship of those whose outlook on life had not been blurred and distorted by deception and sorrow and pain—unearned and uncomprehended.

CHAPTER IV.

MONOCLOID.

PAUL MERRIMAN was riding in the sunlight of an April afternoon at Quetta. The fruit-trees above the sparkling water-channels on either side of the road were masses of pink and white blossom, almond and peach and apricot—vivid contrast to the gaunt splintered rock of Murdar, whose ten thousand feet, still topped with the last vestiges of the winter snow, stabbed the clear blue sky beyond where on the outskirts of Quetta the low tower of the Staff College—so English in design—showed a square flag-topped mass against the dusty hills behind.

Turning into the lawn-fringed drive of the 50th Punjabi Rifles' mess, where a captured German field-gun and a couple of Turkish maxims were being meticulously cleaned by a Dogra sepoy who had assisted in their collection, he passed through the garden—clumps of heavily-scented wallflower, thick beds of violets, pink fragrance of climbing rose, clusters of nodding lilac rich with perfume of home—and pulled up outside the two bachelor quarters attached to the mess-house. In response to his hail a Punjabi Mussulman—obviously a soldier—emerged, who, after greeting, announced that Brown sahib was even now within, and thereafter led away Paul's grey waler mare.

Paul pushed his way past a miscellany of crates, oddments of motor gear, and other piled-up belongings, into the two rooms occupied by that versatile genius Adrian Brown, more often referred to by his intimates as "Monocloid."

The room—littered with every description of gear—was an accurate index to its owner's character. A smallish writing-table was heaped with odds and ends—an open Bonsa tool-set; two pairs of field-glasses; a pistol-holster under repair; a leather punch and spare components thereof, with odd pieces of leather and washers of a dozen different sizes; a few lathe tools; two sparking-plugs; an electric-torch; a roll of maps; and—pushed anyhow into one corner—pens and pencils, inks and paper.

On the floor beside an open mule-trunk was a miniature lathe, with, near it on top of a wooden packing-case, an equally miniature oil-engine—or, to be correct, an air-engine, which functioned on a mixture of methylated spirit and hot air, and which therefore Monocloid had christened lovingly “Atmospheric Algy.” Algy was supposed to run the lathe, but owing to lack of power—his nominal rating was $\frac{1}{8}$ horse—he always choked out under load. So at the moment his cylinder was being shaved to get better balance, and parts of his interior economy lay blushing naked upon a small tea-table near by, in company with two or three scientific periodicals and a patent camera attachment—for Monocloid is an inventor of note, one before whom the inventions committee are silent.

On the walls hung a couple of old engravings, a Khirgiz felt hat, a cartridge-belt or two, a much-worn poshtin, and a varied array of tools such as might conceivably be useful to an explorer.

In a corner lay a pile of files, heaps of assorted papers representing Monocloid's pursuit of the knowledge of the art of war—an occupation that filled many of his spare moments when more important business was not at hand,—a pair of felt Gilgit boots, a newly-manufactured hand-made gun-case with varnish still wet, a couple of pairs of silk-tasselled chaplis.

Such parts of the colour-washed walls as were not hung with oddments were adorned with pencil or chalk notes jotted down in moments of inspiration—deriva-

tions of Pashtu or Persian words, connected root-forms of Aryan tongues, miscellaneous diagrams and calculations of survey work, interesting data on racial affinities.

In an otherwise unoccupied space to one side of the room was a long chair, in which, clothed in very open-collared and tieless tennis shirt, khaki shorts with gay-gartered khaki stockings, and heavy chaplis of his own pattern, reposed Monocloid, the monocle, which earned him his nickname, firmly screwed into one eye, his bare knees tucked over one arm of his chair, and a copy of the 'Scientific American' drooping from one somnolent hand.

As Paul stumbled into the room among the heterogeneous collection of goods and chattels, Monocloid opened his eyes and regarded him dreamily.

"Hulloa, Merriman, old bean, so you've fetched up. What's the time?"

Then he took out his eyeglass, looked at it, screwed it into his eye once more, and dozed off again.

Paul moved a bundle of maps, a spare pistol-holster, a coat, and an open volume on the Nordic race by a noted American writer, from the only other chair in the room, and sat down. Then he pulled out his pipe, filled and lit it, whereafter he flung the pistol-holster at Monocloid, who dreamily reopened his eyes and partly woke up.

"Yes, old thing, as you see, I've fetched up. Work very heavy, isn't it?" There was a suspicion of a smile at the corner of Paul's mouth.

"So—so," replied Monocloid without shifting other than to push the pistol-holster to its more natural place on the floor. "Say, old dear, was Minna outside when you came in?"

"No. Didn't see the lady. Sayyid Ali took Dawn Mist away, though. Why?"

"Because she's got a new ornament round her young neck—silver thing on pure Celtic lines. I always thought there was a good deal of connection between the Awan and the Nordic Celt."

Minna—aged three—is the daughter of Monocloid's Punjabi orderly, Sayyid Ali; daughter of a fighting clan that has followed Monocloid and his like over half the known and unknown world. She is small and fat; full of self-possession; large brown eyes ringed with kohl, and tonsured head with long locks sweeping over her ears; nutty trouserings, and braceleted wrists. Some day she will go into purdah, and then doubtless marry some youth in Monocloid's regiment and become the mother of tall clean-limbed Punjabi fighting men; but at the moment she is free of purdah restrictions, and plays round in her queer little self-sufficient way with the oddest of extemporised toys, or sits in the garage in Monocloid's Overland car, or, perched in her father's arms, takes stock of the world, and finds it good.

Paul picked up the book on the Nordic race.

"At it again?" he asked, as he turned over the pages. "What's the latest theory?"

When Monocloid is not engaged in exploring, he spends most of his time in theorising on ethnology, whence the other half of his nickname, for he divides the livable world into two parts—Nordic, which is you and me and the decent white folk; and Mongoloid, which is the rest—Chinese, Prussians, Kahnucks, and so on. He admits other minor divisions, but considers they don't count seriously in the present century.

His theories are engaging, and not the least interesting of his discoveries the last time he traversed Central Asia was his realisation of the similarity of odour between dead Prussians as observed in Flanders and Chinese corpses as remarked in Kashgaria, a point which he considers entirely justifies the Prussian's claim to the title of "Hun."

"Nothing new. But that cove is better than most of them. He has glimmerings of sense on the question. He's got hold of the only real theory that in any way explains the war, which he puts down as essentially a racial struggle between Nordic and Mongoloid."

He sat up in his chair and flung the 'Scientific American' into a corner among other débris.

"Say, old thing, have you ever considered the futility of sewn leather-work? Rots when it gets wet—man can't repair it himself—have to have a saddler or a bootmaker. Now with laced leather like this"—he held up the pistol-holster, which in lieu of being sewn was fastened together with leather thongs threaded through carefully-punched holes—"no need for skilled labour—every man does his own—resultant saving of transport, economy of man-power; any fool can use a leather-punch, costs less, lasts longer. What about it?"

He surveyed his handiwork with pride, and continued—

"Here's the bally Government screaming over shortage of cash, and they're still using sewn leather-work—boots, saddles, harness—paying men to sew things to come to bits again—waste of material—chucking away money. Now if I ran the show, first item would be cutting out all sewing . . ."

"Quite, old dear," said Paul soothingly. "But pull your brains off that for a moment, and let's have a look at those photos you asked me up to see."

"Photos? Oh yes—right oh. In the yakhdan on your left. Yank 'em out. No, not that lot—the ones under the shirts."

Paul was rummaging among the miscellaneous collection which filled the battered leather mule-trunk that had accompanied its owner half-way to Peking, and from Peshawur to Piccadilly *via* Moscow. Monocloid is a wanderer of the waste places of the earth, and his idea of real happiness is to fare forth into the blue with a handful of border scallywags, living as his predecessors lived when first the English in India made their way up the rock-girt Northern Frontier and first came into contact with the border tribes—so completely Anglo-Saxon in their manly independence, so entirely Celtic in their disregard for the sanctity of human life.

There are few places you can mention between Con-

stantinople and Quetta, Peshawur and Yarkand, that Monocloid hasn't visited some time or other. The Great War found him busy travelling overland from Kashmir to Petrograd, and his diary of Russian mobilisation as observed *en route* is more than readable. Arriving in England per tramp steamer from Finland, he disappeared from view until he had ascertained that all the Indian Army officers had safely left for the East on urgent recall. Then he emerged from cover and manœuvred himself to France, drifting into the Flying Corps on the grounds of having spent one pre-war leave in studying the gentle art of flying Farmans.

His career there was bright but meteoric, since one day the more important parts of his engine were removed by German anti-aerial activity, and, crashing nobly, he broke his neck, without, however, it is believed, misplacing his eyeglass.

Having mystified the doctors by continuing to live, albeit with a slight twist in his neck, he slid back to France, this time to join his beloved sepoys—now arrived in Flanders. Later on a large and noisy shell sent him home once more, this time to perplex still further the medical profession when the X-rays revealed, in addition to the originally displaced neck vertebra, an undoubtedly fractured spinal one.

In revenge for his again refusing to die or be crippled, the doctors packed him back to India to lead a boresome life training recruits, but after strenuous endeavours in the wangling line and the expenditure of a few shillings on "Russian without tears," he contrived to induce some one to select him as a Russian expert and pack him off to Central Asia on a special mission when Bolshevik activities were beginning to attract notice in that forgotten corner of the earth.

His fluent pen, his quick observation, and his skill with a camera made his notebook more than interesting, and it was to see these same photos that Paul Merriman had ridden up that afternoon.

Finally, Monocloid pulled himself out of his chair,

settled his monocle more firmly in place, and from under a pile of socks produced the photos. They were an attractive collection—quaint places and quainter types,—and Monocloid's original comments rendered them things without price, for to each and every one was some anecdote revealing a quick sense of the humorous, a keen appreciation of human nature, and a refreshingly unspoilt outlook on life that went well with Monocloid's boyish mouth. A child in many ways—the attractive ones,—with a child's zest for life—the simpler pleasures of life,—and withal a man's wide vision, even though at times fantastic in thought and speech. Of all the cheery, irresponsible, resourceful, versatile, and companionable souls one might meet in a long journey, Adrian Brown would come an easy first.

The photos, not too well arranged, were mixed with more commonplace ones—groups of regimental gatherings, sports, and the like, which Monocloid tossed carelessly aside. But one of them struck Paul as familiar, and he picked it up.

“Hulloa, there's that Lahore week hockey photo. Haven't seen that for years. And there's Carter—Fifi Carter—of your lot. Do you remember how we ragged him over that pony of his—chestnut countrybred—that he could never hold properly? He was killed, wasn't he?”

“Yes. East Africa, somewhere in the middle. Good chap ‘Fifi.’ Used to share a bungalow with him and another fellow. Rather an oyster, though; but he used to talk a bit to me.”

Monocloid looked at the photo Paul was holding.

“Good one of ‘Fifi’ that. Took badly as a rule. That was the last time I saw him. He went off to some course or other straight from Lahore, and before he came back I had started on my Russian trip, and then came the war. Some mystery about ‘Fifi,’ I always thought. Had some old family papers he used to pore over lots—come down from an ancestor of his—an old French adventurer. Funny bit of green jade that he

wore round his neck too. I always wondered what it was."

"A piece of jade round his neck." Paul put the photo down. The remembrance of his grandfather's story came back, and with it the thought of his own piece that was even now in his pocket. That was queer about Fifi. Ever since Paul had been given the thing in the General's study in far-away Sussex things had seemed to be rather different, though how he could not explain. Something different in himself perhaps. A more vivid appreciation of life—of people—a keener outlook. A new interest in things somehow. But what on earth could that have to do with a bit of stone? Still this seemed rather odd.

"What sort of a thing? Funny idea wearing a charm like that, though I remember an Air Force cove who used to wear an elephant hair bangle."

"Rough chunk all covered with Nagri letters and with a Persian inscription of sorts. . . ."

Paul's hand went to his pocket then.

"Been in his family for years, he said. Tied up with the same old French ancestor who was in the service of some kinglet in South India in the year dot, when the French and we were scrapping."

"Like that?" asked Paul simply, as he held out the piece his great-uncle had given him.

Monocloid took the piece and studied it through his monocle, which, by the way, is really for use, since one eye is exceptionally over-sighted. His eyes are indeed characteristic of his dual personality, one-half of which is eminently sound and practical, the other abnormal, ultra imaginative and altogether remarkable. But to look at they are quite alike, keen when not dreamy, grey-blue under very long dark lashes, frank and honest to a degree. He turned over the fragment, and then looked up.

"Might be its twin. Where did you get it? It's not Fifi's by any chance? But it can't be."

Paul gave him a brief résumé of its history, to which

Monocloid listened absent-mindedly, playing with the stone, and to all appearances not paying any attention, though the quick brain behind the dreamy eyes was taking it all in.

"I was sure it couldn't be Fifi's bit, because I happened to be at the depot when his kit came back. I had to sort it out, and I looked for that piece of jade. There was a list of the kit made up by some bloke who'd picked him up after the show, and he said that a green stone that Fifi wore round his neck was buried with him. Ever noticed how 'dead' dead people's things look when you unpack them?"

Paul had noticed that fact many a time, and said so as he brought Monocloid back to the point. This thing was getting interesting.

"Were the papers among his kit?"

"Not then, but they turned up later along with some other things he'd left with his bankers when he went on service. I looked through them before I sent them on to his people. Weird old crabbed things in French, rather meaningless in parts. I hadn't any time to think about them, as I was just getting off on my Bolshie stunt, and anyway they weren't particularly my pigeon. But say, Bo'."

The speaker's eyes were thoughtful now—not dreamy—and there was something of excitement in his movements as he went over to the window to examine the jade better in the fast-fading light, whistling softly with pursed-up lips. Monocloid thinks quickly and acts rapidly too, despite his apparent lethargy—partly perhaps assumed—partly the natural reaction from moments of intense activity. He will get down to something that interests him, and go at it without stopping the whole night, and then spend next morning sleeping till all hours, or dozing in an arm-chair.

"What?" interrogated Paul.

"Well, methinks there's something behind this outfit. People don't go and cut Persian inscriptions on chunks of carved jade and write long papers about

nothing, do they? What about writing a line to Fifi's people and asking them to let us have the papers? I know them slightly—at least I know his mother; the old man died last year. I smell Stevenson and 'Treasure Island.' What about it?"

The sleepiness had vanished and the more abnormal Monocloid—brimful of enthusiasm for a new idea—was coming to the top as he moved across the room to lean against the mantelpiece, still looking at the green stone in his hand.

"What about it?" he reiterated.

Paul Merriman was thinking—his burnt-out pipe in the corner of his mouth, his dark brows a little puckered over the grey eyes. There was no doubt that that weird green stone was bringing lots of things into his life—things he had never dreamed of,—and here was Monocloid now opening up a new line with his fantastic theories of treasure.

His old great-uncle's words about the quest he had not even thought of beginning came back to him. What quest did the old man mean? Was he gifted with an uncanny power of looking into the future? Treasure? No, he didn't want treasure. But the unknown? Yes, that was always fascinating—far better than any of Pelman's four-guinea aims. The unknown? Yes, that always drew one—like—like a pair of deep grey eyes under perfectly arched brows—eyes that seemed to hold all sorts of shadows in their depths so different from ordinary people's eyes. The jade and the lamp-lit study in the Sussex house, Stella Nash and the vivid Aden sunshine, Monocloid with his fantastic trains of thought—where did it all lead to and what was he, matter-of-fact Paul Merriman, doing in it? But was he matter-of-fact in reality? What claim to matter-of-factness had that subconscious self which came to the surface over a fire and a pipe—or emerged unbidden during long solitary rambles in the blue-shadowed snow-topped hills of the north that his soul always hankered after—that took quiet charge of him in the translucent dawn light

or the evening shadows when none other was near? What claim indeed had that to be called "matter-of-fact"? Absurd to think, though, that an inanimate piece of stone was going to affect him.

"What about it, old bean? Don't dream."

Pot to kettle indeed, but Monocloid's voice brought Paul back to actualities with a snap, and half unthinking—still wondering—his mechanical "Good egg" brought him all unknowing round the biggest and most portentous corner he ever turned in his life.

"Right. Then I'll push off a line to old Mrs Carter this mail, and ask her if she'll lend me the papers. Shan't tell her anything yet, though."

And then in true Monocloid fashion, that particular point having been more or less settled, Brown went off at a tangent concerning a new invention of his for taking photos. To the unskilled mind it merely seemed a piece of odd-shaped brass, but according to its inventor, its powers—well, there were no human limits to its possibilities.

His visitor suffered it for half an hour, sucking a pipe and interjecting more or less apposite remarks, while the subconscious Paul ran circles round a piece of jade that the visible Paul held in his hand. No, not the colour of jade—deep grey with shadows, quite unlike any other shadows—shadows as attractive and mysterious as Stella's "thinks" about life that always came to the surface when she and he were alone, and which vanished into a sparkle of sunshine when others were by. Just like the snow-waters in the mountain streams—laughing flicker and many-hued jewelled splash of light and nothing showing underneath—but get into the stillness of a rock-bound pool, and lo! shadows and depths undreamed of hitherto.

So later, as his mare trotted steadily home in the misty dusk between the shadowy trees—the gaunt jagged hilltops behind him rose and maroon in the last touch of the sun already out of sight behind the giant shoulder of Chiltan ahead,—putting his hand into his

pocket his fingers came into contact with the piece of jade, and it seemed to Paul that once again the stone was alive, and subconsciously he could see it winking at him. Only this time it went on—

“*I* have a meaning which perhaps you’ll find if you try. But you have too, really, and maybe you’ll grasp it some day now.”

And he wondered whether perhaps the uncanny thing wasn’t getting perilously near the truth.

CHAPTER V.

STELLA AND PAUL.

PAUL shut up his typewriter with a click, pushed the case over to the side of his writing-table, got to his feet, and lit a cigarette. A pile of stamped envelopes at one corner of the neat table spoke to his afternoon's labours. Sunday was always his day for letter-writing—not that he was a great correspondent in the sense of writing many letters, but when he did write he wrote at length, generally with a typewriter.

He walked across the tidily-kept room—the very antithesis of Monocloid's quarters—and looked out of the window into the garden, gay with blossom of spring. Paul himself was no gardener, though he loved flowers; but Davis of his regiment, with whom he shared the bungalow, was enthusiastic in the matter, and the trim little garden laid down by the previous occupants—a married couple now home on leave—was kept at its very best, and the very best of a Quetta garden in spring is good indeed if you can only get water enough. A corner of home in a thirsty dusty land, with blossom of fruit-tree and thick beds of colour, and climbing up the verandah pillars, English honeysuckle.

At the moment reflectively considering the smoke of his cigarette, he was deep in the ever-recurring question of what to do with himself for the rest of the afternoon. He had partly solved the problem by ordering his mare for half-past three, which would more or less force him to ride, since he hated cancelling orders. A skilful use of this dislike of his to changing things at the last

moment had enabled him to mark down in some measure a course of action for the afternoon, and the sound of his mare's hoof-falls on the stones outside carried conviction to his hesitating soul.

But the second half of the problem still remained unsolved. Ride; yes, that was fixed with Dawn Mist outside. But where to? That was not so easily settled. It was simple enough to order a pony and to tell one's servant to put out riding-kit. That constrained one to a certain course of action. But having put on the boots and breeches and got into the saddle, what then?

Paul felt his resolution waning. Where the dickens was he to go to? The race-course lacked attraction; he had ridden there three times in the last week. A long hack into the open country, vistas of stone-strewn plain, bad going for the most part. No, nothing very inviting about that prospect, certainly not by oneself. The Staff College riding-tracks and jumps, to whose use he was entitled as a subscriber? But Quetta was getting dusty now, and afternoon rides up there meant breathing all the dust kicked up by more fortunate folk who could turn out in the morning when simpler-minded soldiers had to be on parade.

He got his topi and a switch, and went out on to the verandah, still irresolute, and after looking to girth and curb-chain—he was cautious in most things—swung himself into the saddle, and still without the vaguest idea of where he was going, rode out of the compound. The mare settled the matter by turning left-handed up the road to Seven Streams and the Staff College, past the pack artillery guardroom, where the turbaned Indian gunner stood sentry over the dumpy little mountain guns of his battery.

As the grey mare pounded steadily up the sunlit road under the mulberries and poplars, Paul cogitated. Should it be the dusty riding-track on the Hanna road, or would he go on into the Hanna valley with its little stone-edged fields and clumps of fruit-trees round the brown

mud huts. Then an idea struck him. Why not drop into the Carlos' for tea? They were generally in on Sunday afternoons, and one was always welcome there, since Mrs Carlos' idea of entertaining was for people to drop in when the spirit moved them. Formal entertainment she abhorred, but she had always the warmest welcome for the chance comer.

Irresolution vanished, and at Seven Streams, with its star of little rippling water-courses under the almond-trees, he turned uphill towards the Carlos' house, and presently rode into the big straggling garden with its wilderness of gnarled fruit-trees. To his disappointment, the old goat-bearded Hindustani servant announced that the Carlos were out, and he was about to ride away again when Stella appeared in the doorway.

"Won't you come in, Major Merriman? The others are out—gone for a run in the car along the Sariab road. They'll be back later, but I felt like a book and a fireside tea to-day. Come and join me."

"What! in the book?" said Paul.

"No, in the tea," laughed Stella, as she turned to the servant, bidding him call some one to take Paul's mare.

Paul slid to the ground, and Dawn Mist nuzzled at him for the piece of sugar that always came at the end of the day's work.

"Sounds attractive—a fireside tea," said he, as he handed the reins to the servant. But a far greater attraction was the prospect of an hour or so *tête-à-tête* conversation with Stella in an atmosphere that would undoubtedly lead her to "think aloud," as she did sometimes with him. As he followed her into Mrs Carlos' "homey" drawing-room, with its clusters of English flowers, its attractive pictures of garden corners at home and water-colours of Devon moors, its complete absence of the garish Eastern ornamentation that so many people affect in India, it struck him once more, as it had struck him many a time, that this was essentially the kind of room that Stella would affect, and

the kind of room that he would choose for her if he had the choosing of her rooms.

He pictured her as she must have been when his voice outside had disturbed her—the arm-chair pulled up to the fire, and the open book face down on the little carved table with the big bowl of wallflowers on it. A really lazy and attractive afternoon evidently.

“Try the sofa,” she said, pulling it up nearer to the fire. “Personally, I think a big arm-chair is better than any sofa.” And she seated herself once more in the chair by the fire. “There’s a tin of Carlos’ ‘stinkers’ behind that photo at the corner of the mantelpiece; I know you prefer those to the Egyptians that Marjorie and I always smoke.”

Paul helped himself to a cigarette, and settled in the corner of the sofa. Despite the warmth of the spring air, a fire is still attractive of an April evening in Quetta, doubly attractive perhaps for the feeling which it gives you that Baluchistan is not really India, being, as Monocloid would say, “cis-Indus.”

“And what have you been doing with yourself all the week,” asked Stella, as she put away her book. “I haven’t seen you since last Sunday. You weren’t at either of the band afternoons at the club.”

“Odd jobs of all sorts—hockey in the lines most afternoons, a ride or two. Nothing of note really. Writing mail as usual this afternoon until I thought I would wander up here and see if any one was at home. And you? I’ve not seen you either.”

“Did you expect to see me playing hockey in your lines then?” Stella’s quizzical glance as she settled luxuriously in her chair, two trim suede-shod feet stretched to the blaze, brought the ready smile to Paul’s lips.

“Not exactly, Mrs Nash. But that doesn’t answer my question as to your doings, does it? How have you been passing the days?”

“Like you, ‘nothing of note.’ A ride or two—a dance tea or so at the club—the usual dinner at people

who are trying to 'get you off.' " She looked at the book she had just put down. "And this."

"What is it ? " he queried.

" 'Parallel Lines.' Have you read it ? "

"No. Who's the author ? "

" 'Richard Brown' he—or she—calls himself. Personally, I believe I ought to say 'herself.' The thing is far too intuitively understanding of the woman's point of view for a man to have written. It's the eternal problem that's always agitating the modern world—*divorçons nous ?* "

"But why the title ? "

"Because parallel lines meet in infinity, don't they ? At least, they used to when I was a flapper at school. Lots of pairs of people in this world find themselves running on parallel lines, one or other or both being meanwhile intersected with some third person. And infinity is a very far cry. Remains divorce as a solution to the tangle to bring together the parallel lines, without waiting the indefinitely long time it takes to reach infinity. Sounds like Euclid, but it's quite well written, and very, very human."

"Is the author for or against divorce, then ? "

"For ; essentially for, with lots of well-thought-out arguments. Very convincing in places, and yet I don't agree with her."

"Perhaps you've got religious views on the point," said Paul.

He often wondered what particular religious views Stella did hold. She did not seem to frequent any church that he knew of ; not that he himself was any particular pillar of religion, for all that he had very strong ideas about the Creator and the universe and man's place therein.

"But it's only partly that," said Stella, "for I really haven't any definite religion, you know. Does that sound very dreadful ? But what I mean is that all religions are very much the same at bottom—it's only the frills on top that vary, and some frills are nicer

than others. It seems to me that we're all the same really—trying to be a bit better than our natural selves would like to be if we'd let them, and trying as much as possible to do to others what we would like them to do for us. That, I take it, is what life is for, with something bigger and grander to follow. But as for dogma, I've got none. But somehow I can't conceive of divorce as being intended in the scheme of things. It doesn't fit my ideas at all."

"But why?" asked Paul. "It seems to me that it's the logical proposition for people who can't hit it off, unless, of course, there's children to complicate things, or something like that."

Stella was pondering, looking into the fire, brows slightly knitted, as was her way when thinking.

"I really can't explain quite—I've not got my thoughts too clear on the point. But somehow I feel that it's wrong—distasteful if you like. Yes, it's more that really in my mind. It seems to me that the essence of marriage is the feeling of intimacy, of sharing something from which all the rest of the world is utterly debarred. But if some one else is going around who has also shared it, then it must be spoilt. And even the most unsuccessful of marriages must have started off with an opening of intimacy—even if only one-sided,—a certain laying bare of one's innermost soul that somehow—to me anyway—could not be repeated if the first person were still here.

"I'm involved, aren't I—as usual,—but if you can understand that, then you can see one of my chief reasons for not agreeing with Mr—or Mrs, I'm sure it's really Mrs—Brown. And I think also that divorce actually threatens marriage, and marriage—to me—is the ideal relationship between man and woman."

"No, you're not involved altogether beyond my understanding. It's merely, of course, that you want in that, as in all things, the ideal. The idealist figures largely in your make-up, Mrs Nash."

"*Aut Cæsar—aut nullus.*" I'd rather, though. The

best is always worth playing for, isn't it? I'd sooner try and climb the high way than grope about in the muddy flats. But here's the material in the shape of tea! Pull up that little table will you, please."

As Paul watched her pouring out the tea, the tremendous contrast between this and the cup of tea that he and Davis had of an afternoon struck him more forcibly than ever before—the difference between the dainty china, the snow-white tray-cloths, the flickering firelight glinting on the well-kept silver, and the chipped cups, the enamelled iron teapot, the distasteful slabs of toast on not over well cleaned plates that his bearer planted on his uncovered stained table. Above all, the presence here of the presiding deity in grey silk blouse and well-tailored skirt, gleam of gold at slender wrist and throat, busy in what Paul always thought the most important part of woman's sphere in the world, bringing something of the ideal into the material necessities of daily life—the old feeling which rules that while the master of the house should carve the joint, the mistress should dispense the sweets.

Was marriage after all, then, only a trammelling of freedom, only a limitation to life? Were there not perhaps other factors that might almost—no, not quite, though—compensate for the boxes and bundles, the crates and casks, even for the tins of Glaxo and the sewing-machines—compensate almost for the risk of parallel lines?

"A penny, or only a halfpenny, Major Merriman?" queried Stella, munching a scone, eyes agleam with friendly malice.

"I wasn't thinking—really," he replied with a slight start. "My mind was just sort of wandering. A mixture of chipped enamel teapots and parallel lines, if you can follow that. But I don't suppose you can, for it was incoherent even to me."

"No," said Stella reflectively; "I don't think I can quite. *Is there any connection?*"

"Roundabout." He helped himself to another sand-

wich. "Chipped enamelled teapots spell the bachelor hut. This"—he indicated the tea-table—"is the 'home.' Which is another way of spelling the ideal, since when the first woman came along to civilise the first man, she, as it were, weaned him from chipped enamelled teapots to refinement like this—not only in food, but in all the rest of life too. And so now even the most complete bachelor sometimes hankers after feminine refinement, and perhaps reckons up the cost, and reflects on the risk of running into a set of parallel lines. Involved thinking, I admit. Hardly a pennyworth, was it?"

"Yes, I think it was, though. Then you consider that woman is the refining agent, the seeker after the ideal? You make me think of 'The Cat that walked by itself' in the Just-So Stories, where Kipling clearly makes out that all the nice things were produced by the woman. But as a matter of daily experience, I'm not sure that it isn't the man who is the more idealistic very often. Woman as woman is practical and matter-of-fact—much concerned with the prosaic details of daily life, more 'grown-up' if you like, than the average man, who often keeps a lot of the child. At least some of him seem to, while others . . ."

She stopped and looked into the fire, suddenly quiet, and Paul saw again the little straight line down between her eyebrows and the extra thought-shadow in her eyes. But somehow he didn't like to repeat her bantering offer of a halfpenny or even of a penny. Stella Nash's silences were things one didn't want to break on.

Then she looked up again, smiling as she reached for the cigarette-box, and lit a cigarette.

"There's a lot of the child about both sexes as a matter of fact, isn't there? The thing that the child loves more than anything else is the old, old game of 'Let's pretend.' And, all of us, we still love it, and we go on playing it nearly all our lives just pretending things about other people, pretending that the things we'd like to think true *are* true, and like the children

wishing they were true until we almost believe they really are. Resolutely shutting our eyes to the fact that the towel-horse is only a towel-horse, with towel-horsey bits sticking out all over it, because we've 'let's pretended-ed' that it is a fiery dragon or a faithful Arab steed."

"It would be a poor world, after all, Mrs Nash, if one couldn't play the 'let's pretend' game, though, wouldn't it? The question bears on your views of the subjective and objective, seeing towel-horses as towel-horses only, and not as prancing chargers."

"It would be no world at all, for 'let's pretend' is the morphia of the gods, the one thing that makes life livable at all to many of us. Does that sound bitter?"—her mouth was graver now. "I don't mean it bitterly, but there is such a lot of unhappiness staring one in the face as one goes through life that one realises that for many the 'let's pretend' policy is the only one that gets them along at all. And when they can't pretend any more, they just die. I suppose that's what getting old is—really old, I mean—old in mind, not merely in body. It means that you can't make-believe any more."

"And what about the parallel lines? Do they have to pretend they're not parallel?"

"Either that, or else that they've reached infinity; or else, perhaps"—she looked into the fire as she spoke—"that there are no intersecting lines to spoil the diagram. But I don't fancy"—she looked up again—"I don't fancy they think very much. They probably are busy trying to forget."

"But, after all, forgetting is only another form of pretending, isn't it? You cut out what's gone, and pretend you're starting in from the beginning."

"Yes; if you have the fortune to be a man. If you're a woman—well, you just pretend that you're pretending—for an hour, or a day, or a week—for, no, not for a whole month. I wonder what unforgiveable sin Eve committed that all her daughters should have been punished with the gift of memory?"

Stella was talking to herself now, no longer to her listener, as she sat there, her chin on her hands, looking into the fire in the gathering dusk. Her question was one that expected no answer, even if Paul had been able to give one, which he certainly wasn't. Woman's retentive memory for anything that has really hurt has puzzled cleverer brains than his for centuries beyond counting. He understood dimly that she was thinking now about those years before the war, though he would not have told her so, and, man-like, he wondered why she didn't just put it clean out of her head once for all, finished, done with, hence forgotten.

Then there was the sound of a car turning into the drive, and Stella straightened up in her chair.

"Thinking aloud again as usual," she laughed, and the shadows were gone once more from her eyes; "why do I always do it and why don't you?"

"Lack of machinery probably," replied Paul with a smile as he got up to meet the Carlos.

CHAPTER VI:

STELLA'S LUCK-STONE.

MARJORIE CARRUTHERS sat at her dressing-table, silver-backed brushes and silver-lidded trinket-boxes gleaming in the lamp-light, ignoring the piquant freckled face which looked back at her from the mirror as she played mechanically with orange-sticks and chamois leather. Her mind was very far removed just then from her personal appearance, for all that she took some considerable pride in her turn-out, since she was not one of those women who hold the theory that "when you've caught your mouse where's the sense of wasting any more cheese?"

Marjorie's views, on the contrary, inclined to the infinitely more practical and—be it added, from a male point of view anyway—infinitely more desirable tactics, that once the mouse, in the shape of Carlos, had been induced into the cage by the aid of cheese of the yellow soap variety, which is really the only kind the young girl knows of, thereafter he should be tamed and kept tame by a careful diet of camembert and stilton of the best. Hence her frocks, her hats, and, most of all, her really attractive self were invariably pleasing to the eye—most particularly and specially to the eye of Colonel Charles Carruthers.

Which may explain his frequent habit, even after ten years of marriage, of invading her room before dinner to curl himself up in a cosy arm-chair with a cigarette while she was dressing, to watch the mysterious rite and to listen to Marjorie on life, for her dressing-table

seemed always to induce thought and speech both invariably interesting.

"Very reflective to-night, old thing," said he, grey eyes gleaming through his cigarette smoke. "What's the problem?"

"Lots of them. But chiefly—Stella."

"What's the trouble with her anyway? She's going strong enough."

"She is; too strong for some people—Paul, for instance."

"What's the matter with Paul? Lad seems all right. What's Stella been doing to him?"

"Stella? Oh, nothing—nothing except letting him fall in love. Any one with half an eye could see that the man's head over ears in love with her already."

"Well, why shouldn't he be? He's a nice enough lad, and she might do much worse—very much worse."

"She has done much worse once, and that's the danger. I'm so afraid now that she won't trust any one any more, and that she'll go and spoil his life and hers, and I like the man. And Stella's a dear, but I'm sure she'll mess this up. She's not in love with him yet as far as one can see, and yet she must know perfectly well where it's all leading to."

"I know some one who announced that she wasn't in love with me, and yet she must have known where it was all leading to. That's cunning hunting really, though, isn't it?"

"Well, I never hunted *you* anyway."

"No. I suppose sitting up over a kill isn't 'hunting,' if you're a stickler for strict accuracy. You let the panther think he's doing the hunting, don't you? But it's very cunning. Lets you look awfully innocently surprised when spots does happen along and gets bagged. 'Specs that's what Stella's up to."

"But the trouble is that I don't believe she does want to bag him. She's like that old fossil who came down to Chandla and sat up for big game merely to take photos."

"But how much nicer for the big game. Much less offensive than getting a '450 bullet behind the shoulder."

"How would you have liked it if I'd only taken your photo? Game is meant to be bagged, not photographed."

"Bagged, skinned, cured, dried, and made into mats—door-mats. Am I a nice door-mat, old thing?"

Marjorie turned round and looked at him curled up in his chair with a smile that had a good deal of admiration for her very presentable husband of the clean athletic figure, clear tanned skin, and keen grey eyes over the close-clipped reddish-brown moustache. A soldierly figure of a man, well kempt, well groomed.

"Quite a respectable one anyway, as I told you even before we were engaged. Quite fit to be seen out with."

"On the floor of the car, I suppose."

"No, at the wheel preferably." This seriously.

"You really mean windin' up the machine when you've run down the self-starter, or grovellin' underneath with the jack. Anyway, I'm glad I'm respectable, even if I'm only a sun-dried alum-cured mat."

Marjorie stood up and stepped into her dress. "If you're feeling extra 'speccable,' as Heather says, you can do up my frock for me, and for heaven's sake don't put cigarette ash down my back."

"Why? Doesn't it mix with the powder?"

"Idiot! And listen, Paul's got to sit next to Stella, even if you have to break every rule of seniority that ever was."

"He generally does when he dines here, and that's about twice a week. Why this sudden anxiety to-night?"

"'Cos I want to watch them."

"Watch the sitting-up process, I suppose."

"Perhaps. Anyway, there's a car, so you'd better hurry up and see that the drinks are ready. I've got to go and have a last look at Heather."

Marjorie wriggled her rather large but well-shaped

feet into a pair of brocade shoes, gave a last glance at her hair, slipped on some rings, and made for the door leading into the nursery where Heather, aged five, the most delicious bobbed-haired morsel of feminine naughtiness that ever was, was sitting up in her pyjamas waiting for a "goo'-night" kiss.

Carlos looked after her admiringly—he always did look at his wife admiringly,—threw the stump of his cigarette into the fireplace, and went out to greet his guests, pondering at the back of his mind as to what particular plan Marjorie had evolved for the Stella problem. His respect for her wits had in no wise diminished in ten years' very contented married life, and her gift of character-reading evoked his continual admiration.

They were giving a small dinner-party before an amateur theatrical show in aid of local military charities—a married couple of his own regiment, Paul and another man, and one unattached girl. Carlos suspected his wife in the matter of the man and the unattached girl, for Marjorie's hobby in life was the drawing together of wandering stars. And he had to admit that she did it well, discreetly, and with considerable discrimination as to the mutual possibilities of the said stars.

The car was evidently a false alarm, for it passed on to another house, so he sat down on the fender stool. Stella emerged from her room, and came to sit opposite him in a low chair.

"New frocking, Stella? Nice." Carlos was observant where women's clothes were concerned. His wife's tactful handling had improved a natural courtesy to the other sex, and besides, Carlos believed in the word of praise for work well done, one among a dozen qualities that made his men really love him. And, after all, is not to look pleasing one of the chief items of a woman's daily work?

"Observant as ever! Yes, it's new. Please you, my host?"

"Muchly. I like the green pendant thing too. Mar-

jorie's just been telling me I'm quite a respectable addition to a car. I pass on the compliment. What's the pendant ? It looks old."

Stella fingered the rough green stone that hung at her neck on a thin gold cord.

"An old thing of daddy's given him by some native chief he used to bear-lead. It's got a history too, and though it's not valuable, the chief thought a lot of it. Daddy saved him getting mauled by a wounded tiger once, and he was rather grateful and gave him this as a souvenir of the occasion."

"Jade, isn't it ? Carved too."

Carlos leant closer to study it, and then jumped up as a car swung into the drive, pulled up in the porch, and decanted two women and a youthful captain in the fawn mess kit of Carlos' regiment.

"Come along in, Mrs Fordyce," said Carlos. "You know the wife's room. Good-evening, Miss Hardy ; glad the Fordyces were able to bring you up. It's a long drive in a tonga."

As the women passed through to Marjorie's room he turned to Fordyce.

"Evenin', Freddy. Seen anything of Merriman or Paige ?"

"Passed them in a tonga a little way back, sir. Paige's car out of action as usual, I suppose." Fordyce grinned as he struggled out of his coat. "Probably forgot to turn on the petrol."

Major Paige owned a large luxurious-looking car which he drove with some skill. The skill consisted mostly in his uncanny evasion of seemingly inevitable accidents. He explained breezily to those who, for lack of other accommodation, entrusted their necks to him, that tyre costs were best kept down by running on two wheels. This was generally confided at bad corners when his shivering passengers were too far gone to expostulate. But of motor mechanism he was as joyously ignorant as a babe unborn. The previous evening the Fordyces had observed his abandoned car on the roadside, the

mechanical defect leading to its abandonment being the inadvertent turning off of the ignition switch. His sepyo chauffeur was on leave.

"Well, can you find room for him in your car for the show? We'll take Merriman along if you'll take Paige. Otherwise we'll have to rush dinner if they go in a tonga."

"Yes, rather, sir. We can take both if you like."

"Don't worry. We've plenty of room for four." Undoubtedly Marjorie would want the front seat with him, reflected Carlos, as he led his guest indoors. The back seat of the Overland was comfortable for—hunting. Also he guessed that Marjorie would somehow or another manœuvre Paige and the Hardy girl into the comfort of the Fordyce's back seat. He grinned to himself at the thought—a grin that softened to a reflective smile at certain ten-year-old memories as he bent over the sherry-glasses.

Five minutes later a tonga deposited the two remaining guests upon the verandah, and presently they went in to dinner, Carlos, with explanations as to the vital necessity of "splitting the family," having got his party into the order prescribed by Marjorie.

Dinner was talkative, as ever at the Carlos', and Mrs Fordyce, a plump little button quail of a person, seemed gifted with an unceasing flow of—one cannot say conversation—monologue is the more correct word. Even the usually silent Paige—possibly egged on by Miss Hardy—got something not unapproaching diffusion of words to the mouth. But Paul, sandwiched between Stella and Mrs Fordyce, was more silent than his wont.

Firstly, Stella was looking even more attractive than usual, which was saying a lot. But, secondly, and even more wonderful, she was wearing what seemed to be, unless he was going mad and seeing likenesses where none existed, the twin brother of his piece of jade, which at the moment was reposing in Monocloid's despatch-box.

The more he looked at it the more certain he became.

There were the rough-cut Nagri letters, the wavy lines around the edges. As he talked, mechanically inserting apposite remarks whenever the "button quail" upon his left paused for breath, or replying to Stella's laughing sallies, he wondered. Everything seemed to be drawing the two of them together—community of ideas, of thoughts, of likes and dislikes,—and now, to crown all, the coincidence of this green stone.

Stella could not help remarking the way his eyes turned continually to the pendant around her neck, and at last she asked him outright.

"My luck-stone seems to fascinate you, Major Merri-man. Are you a curio hunter, or an antique expert? It's supposed to be rather old."

"Neither. But it reminds me of another piece of jade I've seen with just the same sort of inscription on it and some Persian lettering on the back."

"But how quaint! Mine has some too, and I believe it's rare getting the two characters together, isn't it?" Her eyes were full of interest as she spoke. "Where was the other one?"

"Well, to tell the honest truth"—there was a shade of gravity in Paul's voice, the coincidence was getting too remarkable,—"it's my own. I've got it here in Quetta; it's with Monocloid just at present."

"But how extraordinary! Fancy you having a piece like this."

There was just the faintest accent on the "you" that Marjorie Carlos would have seized upon mentally at once had she been able to hear, but the conversation at her end of the table prevented her from catching their speech, and she was busily engaged in talking to Captain Fordyce. Paul for once missed the nuance in Stella's voice, for he was hearing again his grandfather's words: "Ere you come to the end of the quest that you have not even thought of beginning." Was it beginning now then?

"It is rather a coincidence, because I don't suppose there are many like it knocking about, although I have

just heard of another. When I showed mine to Monocloid, he said a fellow we both used to know had a bit like it too. A subaltern called Carter, who was in Monocloid's regiment, and was killed during the war. But his bit was buried with him, so yours must be still another. I wonder what they are? Where did yours come from?"

She was just beginning to tell him how it had been given to her father when the women rose.

Carlos, sitting over the wine, remarked Paul's unusual silence, and wondered how the "hunting" process was proceeding. The "button quail's" untiring tongue had prevented him catching more than an occasional word of what Paul and Stella had been saying.

Marjorie gave them but little grace, and shortly they were all in the verandah being marshalled into the cars. As Carlos had foreseen, Marjorie insisted on the front seat.

"Is it 'good hunting,' old thing?" he asked as he slipped the car into top, and the long white road rose up towards their headlights.

"Can't say yet. But isn't it a gorgeous night?"

"Yes, look at those stars. Like a night quite a long time ago, when some one else angled for the back seat of a car with a properly understanding couple in front."

Marjorie laughed a low contented laugh as she squeezed the hand her husband slipped under the rug.

"Do as you would be done by," said she.

"Do as you have been done by, you mean," replied Carlos, removing his hand again to play with the lighting switches. "Hope they're getting on nicely. Eyes front for you and me, I suppose."

But Paul was engrossed with Stella's story of her "luck-stone," as she called it, while the purring car slid steadily down the dusty road in the faint light of a waxing moon.

"You see," continued Stella, "the rajah told daddy it was a luck-stone, and had been in his family for years and years. Apparently his great-great-grandfather or

some equally remote ancestor got hold of it when he was quite a petty little chief. Mahrattas they were. The ancestor man had killed the original owner—a Muhammedan Nawab of some place in Central India—Toka I think it was—with his own hand, and taken this off him, and they had kept it in the family ever since. Of course, now they're quite big people. I saw Krishnaji Rao, the chief, once—a fattish man with grown-up sons,—but he was frightfully excited at meeting daddy again, and wanted us to go down and stay with him and shoot. But we were just off home, and daddy never went back."

"I wish you'd let me have a look at the thing later on," said Paul as she finished. "Monocloid has some theory about mine, and this might help."

"I'll show it you when we get to the theatre."

Just then the car swung right-handed, and Carlos threaded his way through a crowd of tongas, cars, and a crush of people up into the blaze of light in front of the garrison theatre.

All Quetta was gathered together for the opening night of the three days' run of the topical revue, "Brighter Baluchistan," a purely local production, plot, libretto, and scenery, even some of the music, being specially composed for the occasion. The hall was a riot of colour from mess kits of thirty different corps—fawn of the frontier, sombre green of rifle regiments, splash of gold and blue and red of Indian cavalry and gunner, cherry-trouserred Baluchis, and the plainer red and blue of the line, with the background of khaki of the men, and the kaleidoscope of women's dresses.

Carlos piloted his party into two boxes to one side of the hall, and Paul of necessity gravitated into a seat behind Stella, Marjorie and Captain Fordyce completing their party.

The invariable chorus of unattached girls promenaded the stage with sunshades of vivid hues, while the usual immaculately clad handful of unemployed subalterns sang the inevitable opening topical ditty to the great

joy of their brother officers in the stalls, and the still greater delight of their men in the back rows.

The garrison comedians—in private life a perfectly respectable battery commander and a captain of British infantry—gave their famous impersonation of the local staff, to the uproarious applause of the gallery. A comparatively junior officer of the Accounts Department, disguised as a local brigand, made burlesque love to the wife of the senior staff officer arrayed as a charlady, while the hero—normally a flight lieutenant in the Air Force—sang an impassioned duet with a pretty but rather self-conscious heroine, and the curtain went down on the first act of what was undoubtedly quite the brightest thing Quetta had produced in the revue line for many years. “Pre-war” every bit, the audience voted it.

But both Paul and Stella were occupied with thoughts considerably removed from the gay nonsense they were watching. Stella was beginning to admit to herself that, among the many men she had met these late years, Paul Merriman stood out very conspicuously as one who, if things had been different or the years could only move backwards—

“The moving finger writes, and having writ
Moves on . . .”

To what did it move on, she wondered. Why did it never stand still a while, and let one take this present, just taste life as it is without always having to think ahead? But no, things wouldn’t stand still even for a little instant. Always progress, always movement. Full noon tinged with shadows of coming evening; autumn tints presaging winter frosts; present happiness and promise of future sorrow.

“Ah, take the cash in hand and let the credit go;
Oh, the sweet music of a *distant* drum.”

But one couldn’t do that, could one really? Always one had to think in front. She visualised herself as walk-

ing a continually dividing road, every step to be considered lest it lead astray in the network of side-tracks—downhill ones probably,—and not even allowed to stand still a space to enjoy the present, just the “now” of unalloyed content.

And signposts, unmeaning or deceptive, blazes untrustworthy on a trail unknown. Things like this luck-stone of hers, for instance. Now why—oh why did Paul have just such another, as he said? She fingered the green pendant, and was aware of Paul leaning forward in the shadow of the box, eyes intently on her face. Marjorie was talking assiduously to Fordyce.

“Still looking at my stone,” she laughed, thoroughly aware that he was not. “What was the inscription on yours?”

“‘Tower of Victory—Moon of Ramzan,’” said Paul, taking her cue. “And on yours?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know, not being able to read Persian character.”

“Let me see,” said he, holding out his hand. Stella mechanically undid the little gold clasp, and slipped off the pendant.

As Paul bent forward to get the thing into the light, she sat looking down on his bent head and on the well-made hands that held her luck-stone. Sinewy fine-cut hands—in keeping with the rest of him,—sensibilities and feelings beyond the common run. Hands you could trust; hands into which a woman might safely give much more than a mere amulet.

“‘Dideh - i - Badshah—ghurub - i - aftab,’” read Paul slowly.

“And what does that mean?” queried Stella, leaning forward.

“Heaven only knows, Mrs Nash,” said he, looking up again. “‘The sight of the king,’ or ‘The king’s vision,’ and something about the ‘setting sun.’ But it’s quaint, since in a way it’s the same kind of inscription as on mine; I mean both refer to something to do with the heavens, and both are meaningless. Apart from the

writing, the two are identical, the same tangle of mixed-up Nagri letters and wavy lines. Have you ever showed it to any one who knows about antiques ? ”

“Never,” replied Stella, as she refastened the clasp. “Why ? Do you think it’s valuable—really valuable as a curio ? ”

“No,” said Paul slowly—“no, I don’t think that. But I do think ”—he hesitated, then went on—“I do think there’s some connection between your stone and mine, although such an idea may sound absurd. Look, Mrs Nash, would you lend me that stone one day ? I’d take real care of it. I’d like to compare it with my own and get Monocloid’s opinion. He has a theory about mine which may or may not hold water later.”

“Certainly, if you’ll really take care of it,” answered Stella, as the curtain went up for the next act, a Baluch raider’s cave, with the comedians hanging out washing in the foreground and the beauty chorus with sunshades tripping down a path in the left corner.

The play continued, the usual medley of pretty dresses, bizarre costumes, impossible happenings, catchy music, topical songs, and some really good dancing. Paul watched it with mechanical eyes, applauding from time to time, but with his mind still set on the problem of the pieces of jade. “Tower of Victory,” “The vision of the King,” the crescent moon and the setting sun. What had they got to do with one another, and, above all, what had they got to do with him and Stella ?

Paul had gone through life without ever really feeling the want of woman’s companionship, though he accepted it if it came his way. Now and then he had thought that life might be the more complete for it ; then some other angle of view would break upon him, making him feel that the disadvantages outweighed the advantages : the limitations it imposed were too shackling for the professional soldier.

But of late that aspect had been less frequent, and much intimacy with the Carlos had given him glimpses of a companionship that was a world apart in itself—

something never realised before. And Carlos was a good enough soldier in all conscience. Besides, after all, reflected Paul, did he really count his career so much as all that? He liked it—more for the side-issues than for the work itself—the chances of travel—of seeing new men and new places—the open-air life—the companionship of his fellows, of men who thought and spoke like he did, who looked at life from much the same angle.

But then Carlos liked all that too, he knew, and yet in Carlos' other world, which only he and Marjorie could enter, must lie realms beyond any he had ever dreamed of. He recalled Marjorie's face when Carlos, driving in from a training-camp unexpectedly, had offered Paul a lift and lunch on arrival; recalled the undefinable atmosphere that hung about the two when together, of a companionship that seemed to embrace the whole of life and something more.

Could he too find that with some one—with Stella? No, not with any one else certainly. But with her? The more he saw the more he felt that it might be so. There seemed to be some inexplicable kinship between them that made them always do things mutually without prearrangement. Silences of mutual consent, quaint simultaneous remarks about the same thing at the same moment, similar impressions of people, of places, of scenery. And most strongly perhaps when dancing together, for Paul, not normally ultra-fond of feminine society, was fond—very fond—of dancing, and danced well according to his partners.

That impression of being mutually attuned had struck him with remarkable force the very first time he had danced with Stella—on board the *Natia*,—just content to go on and on, to speak no word. Quaint, he had thought it at the time. Not a drawing to Stella as any man might be momentarily attracted to any pretty woman—something stronger and deeper, yes, much stronger and deeper, than that; something altogether indefinable, intangible, vivid.

And now the jade? Why had that come? Was

there anything in his great-uncle's theory? An absurd idea on the face of it—just a mere meaningless coincidence. And yet—— He sat there looking over Stella's shoulder at the gay scene on the stage, or now and then studying her half-caught profile against the misty background of the filled hall—parted lips of faultless turn, ivory of skin under the heavy shadowed hair, and eyes that, though he could not see, he knew almost by heart, eyes of the grey of mountain streams, with depths unfathomable behind them, where the “subconscious Stella,” as she called it, sat looking out on life and fashioning her “thinks.”

Did marriage mean that? Admission to the veiled mysteries that lay behind—to heights and depths and breadths as yet unglimped. Paul, by nature, was of those who desire always to see beyond the skyline—to cross the crest and gaze upon the other side. And now, where in the past the physical call to breast the mountain heights and seek the far snow-bound valleys beyond had stirred him from time to time, a new desire seemed to come suddenly upon him. The old quest in a new guise—to seek once more the unknown, the depths that lay behind a woman's eyes, and see if *there* might lie that indefinable something, whose call somehow, half-unwitting, he had always felt within him.

The final curtain came down to a roar of applause, and Paul, standing stiffly to attention as the band broke into the National Anthem, felt that he was even now perhaps definitely entering upon the quest that hitherto he had not “even thought of beginning.”

Nowise impetuous, Paul; slow perhaps sometimes, not inclined to hurry things overmuch, but once his way was mapped out he would stick to it, come avalanche or unwilling porters, come snow, come broken trail. And there—half unconsciously as yet—was born the desire to fathom the coincidence of the jade, to see whether behind the shadows of Stella's eyes might not lie that flower-sprinkled sunlit valley of all delight, which sooner or later breaks upon the vision of every man,

though sometimes maybe only for the briefest space ere the leaden snow-clouds blot it from view once more for ever.

"And the hunting process, old thing?" queried Carlos, smoking a good-night cigarette, and watching his wife brushing the wealth of her golden-brown hair.

"The panther has just caught the distant bleat of the goat," said Marjorie enigmatically.

Which shows that Carlos' respect for his wife's power of perception was not unjustified, since she had carried on a steady conversation with Fordyce most of the evening.

"And is Stella pushing up the safety-catch of the '450 express, or merely turning a new film into place?"

A question that even Marjorie Carruthers was unable to answer.

CHAPTER VII.

KHUNI DARWAZA.

JACK TAYLOR—some time temporary captain in the Expeditionary Forces, now among the great demobbed—sat on a camp-chair in a small tent pitched near the ruined walls of Taragurh Fort in Central India. The yellow glow of his camp lantern made a warm splash of light on the background of broken masonry, which stood jagged black against the sky, now silvered by the rising moon just past its full; and the big banyan-tree with its twisted whitened branches and their antennæ-like roots, whose shade was so welcome during the hours of hot sunlight, now showed grey and ghostly in the moonlight.

The night was silent, save for the eerie call of wandering jackal and the occasional hoot of a night-bird; for the hour was late, and the servants were already asleep in the small tent pitched some little way from Taylor's, the last glowing embers of their cooking-fire showing dull red under the black shadows of tumbled stonework.

But Taylor sat on in his shirt sleeves at the small camp-table littered with papers, the lamplight on his sandy hair and sharp-cut features, now guiltless of the beard which in East Africa had to some extent concealed the thin-lipped mouth and the pointed chin, and rendered less noticeable the faintly cunning aspect of a face which in some ways was not altogether devoid of a claim to good looks. The hair was perhaps a little thinner than it had been, and the lines about the red brown eyes more deeply cut than they had been three

years before, but otherwise there was little difference to be remarked between the man who now sat pondering over some closely written papers in the warm Indian night and the one who, standing at the entrance to Kissimane camp, had watched the survivors of Vivian Carter's company emerge from the bush with their laden stretchers.

Perhaps some recollection of that evening crossed his mind as he leant back in his canvas chair, and then reached across the table for the tin of cigarettes on the far side, for his eyes hardened slightly, as they did often when memories that he would rather not recall came up unbidden. Not that Taylor was much troubled with memories, or with that accusing form of memory that some of us call conscience. His philosophy was of the most purely material; the weakest to the wall his creed; and his sole thought and aim in life the material prosperity and pleasure of Jack Taylor.

He had stuck very consistently to these views ever since the days when his relatives had remarked upon him as an engaging but exceptionally selfish child, even at an age when most children are engaging and nearly all are selfish. But, on the whole, fortune had not shone upon him, and on such occasions as it had seemed to shine for a time his spendthrift tastes had rapidly dissipated the money which his carefully selfish plans had brought him.

The war had not helped him much financially, and now more than ever before money and the need thereof dominated his outlook. Not money for money's sake, to be truthful, but money for what money brought in the way of enjoyment—pleasures generally of the less reputable type.

So when the end of the Great War saw him released from the uncongenial shackles of military service, he had scraped up a few hundred pounds and come over to India in the hope that by dint of some months' toil he might locate the secret at which Vivian Carter's dying words had hinted.

But so far he had achieved little. The secret—if secret there really was—lay locked in the papers which he pored over daily, and in the piece of jade that never left him day or night. The papers were evidently written in some code, and though it was clear that Vivian Carter had somehow managed to read them, he had left no record of the key, and they lay to-night in front of Jack Taylor as they had lain for many nights before—unmeaning and incoherent.

Knowing himself so well, Taylor trusted no one else, and though cipher experts were to be found, nothing would have induced him to seek their aid. He and he alone must find the meaning of those carefully written papers, which held—or so Taylor believed—the secret of wealth untold.

It had been clear from Carter's words that the place with which the manuscript dealt was Taragurh in Central India, a half-forgotten ruined fortress hidden in jungles, visited now only by the occasional hunter of big game. The presence of the rock-carved temples at the foot of the gaunt rock outcrop on which the fort was built had further convinced Jack Taylor of the identity of the place, for he recalled Carter's words about the idols.

Moreover, upon the piece of jade was an inscription in Persian lettering, which he had ascertained read "Khuni Darwaza"—the "Gate of slaughter,"—and in an old account of the ruined fort which he had unearthed in a gazetteer of the Central Provinces of the early 'forties was a reference to the gate of this name in Taragurh Fort.

The gate still stood, nearly unchanged, save for a certain mellowness of the stonework, a certain softening of the sharp lines of the carved Arabic scroll inscriptions which spoke of the passage of centuries—a noble archway above the mouldering walls, towering above the defaced Hindu images at its foot, its carved stonework rich with the names of God and the titles of its royal builder rejoicing in his capture of one of the strongest places in Hind.

Just such an arch as one may see dotted up and down India, erected by the Mussulman conquerors in the first flush of pride at the overthrow of the Hindu of their day, as they sat down with their swords still wet to erect to the glory of God and their own honour some work in undying stone recalling that yet another few thousand heathen had been hurled into the bottomless pit.

The few wandering goatherds from the little jungle villages which Taylor had found in the vicinity of Taragurh avoided the place after dusk. Did not even now the Khuni Darwaza come to life at night, and the crowd of slaughtered dead, whose headless bodies had lain there in a great pile watched by the pyramid of grinning heads as the kites circled above them, return at times to walk in the grass-grown streets and pace the ruined walls ?

But such thoughts worried Taylor not at all. He would have pitched his tent in the heart of the fort or in the Khuni Darwaza itself if necessary. But in point of fact it was cooler without the walls, and his servants undoubtedly preferred it ; not that he minded their feelings, but since their feelings might react on his own comfort, they could be considered in so far as consideration meant nothing to himself.

He lit the cigarette and bent over his papers again. Clue after clue had been tried, clue after clue had failed. He had tried transposition ciphers, letter number ciphers, ciphers simple, single ciphers, double ciphers, but all in vain. To-night he was at work on a new line, what he called an " elimination " cipher. He had tried it in its simplest form first, and, though it gave signs of promise, it failed like the rest. He extended it, and the promise lasted longer, but again broke down. Now he proposed to try it in combination with a numerical series, retaining only words at varying intervals—intervals apparently but based upon a definite recurring arithmetical series.

He took up his pencil and wrote for ten minutes. His lips moved as he counted the words, stopping from time to time to write words selected here and there

according to the plan he was essaying, taking, however, no notice of what he wrote, as the habit comes to people who have spent many days working at cipher.

Then he laid down his pencil and studied what he had written. Suddenly, with a hoarse exclamation, he straightened up, picked up the paper, and read through it again. The first words were disconnected, but then they suddenly became coherent. Evidently he had at last hit upon the key. Was it the key of the whole or were there many ciphers employed? But time would show that; suffice it for the moment that part at least was solved, for the words he had written left no shadow of doubt that at last—long last—he was on the right track. The yellow lamplight played on his lean face, and quite near outside the tent a wandering jackal gave its unearthly call, and with an oath Taylor turned and flung a tent-mallet at the lurking shadow in the moonlight outside, for the noise had startled him, and his nerves were jangled from lack of sleep.

Then he turned again to the paper and read it yet once more, slowly, for his French was not too good, despite his daily efforts to improve it with novel and dictionary. But it was sufficiently good to understand the passage he had written down word by word, selecting numerically from the mass of sometimes unconnected sentences that covered the paper in front of him.

“Un tout petit morceau de pierre verte, et gravé là dessus en perse les mots ‘Portail de sang.’ Le roi me disoit qu’il y’en avait trois autres semblables et qu’il avait fait graver sur chacun des mots qui . . .”¹

“Portail de sang.” That was as good a translation of “Khuni Darwaza” as any other. But what of the three other pieces? Taylor got up and went to the despatch-case wherein he kept certain other papers, rough notes made long ago in a tent like this, where a man lay dying in the warm African night. He opened

¹ “A little piece of green stone with engraved on it in Persian the words, ‘the gateway of blood.’ The king told me that there were three other similar pieces, and upon each he had had engraved words which . . .”

the box, took out some papers, and studied them a while. Yes, that was it, the remark about the piece of jade which some one had hidden among the idols. Did that mean these same rock-cut temples not a mile from where he now stood? Surely it must. Then he locked up the box and sat down to work again.

Hour after hour he sat there, and the false dawn had already begun to pale the indigo of the starlit sky above the low forest-clad hills, a faint first challenge to the moon's silver shield sinking low in the western horizon, a warning of the red glory that shortly would lift over the trees and leave the moon—a wan feeble wraith of her present glorious self—to vanish forgotten and unmissed, just a pale ivory disc in the cobalt sky of the growing day.

But ere he flung himself down on his camp-bed for an hour's sleep he had mastered much of the story that had baffled him for months; pieced together some of Vivian Carter's half-caught remarks; gleaned somewhat of the record which Pierre Rivecourt had penned in far-off Trichinopoly over a century before. The story had been written twenty years after the last siege of Taragurh, when the Nawab Badulla of Toka was slain, sword in hand, in the shadow of the Khuni Darwaza, and Bala Rao Sawant, who slew him, took from his body the jade amulet which his great-grandson was to pass in time to Piers Alban, who, dying, should bequeath it to his daughter Stella.

No easy task, and even now the record was far from complete, for here and there Taylor's system seemed to break down, leaving inexplicable gaps and quaint hiatuses, but still there was enough to work on for the moment. He had established the fact that the record referred in unmistakable terms to the existence of some treasure hidden during the siege; learnt, moreover, that the secret of its hiding-place had been known to four men only—the Nawab Badulla, he to whom Pierre Rivecourt referred as "le roi"; Pierre himself; the Brahman minister, Gopal Tiwari; and lastly, Mahmud

Hussein, Mussulman Rajput of Hissar and commander of the Nawab's bodyguard. Further, he had learnt that the possession of the other pieces of jade seemed a necessary preliminary to the finding of the treasure-house. Of the whereabouts of two of them the papers gave no clue, but of the third—that of the Brahman minister, for the Nawab had given one piece to each of the three, retaining one himself—there was certain information.

As Jack Taylor fell asleep, the words of the old French adventurer which he had first deciphered, then translated, framed themselves again before his mind.

“But the night before the last assault was made upon us, Gopal Tiwari came to my quarters, the little suite of vaulted rooms built into the heart of the walls which I had occupied all through the siege.

“He seemed to me ill at ease, as indeed we all had cause to be, for the enemy pressed upon us more each day, and there were daily stories of treachery afoot. He spoke to me awhile of Mahmud Hussein, whom he mistrusted, and whom indeed I also had upon occasion reason to suspect, though the Nawab trusted him more than all, save perhaps myself—a foreigner—and Gopal, who had served his father before him.

“Then he sat silent for a time looking at me as though he would read my innermost thoughts. For all our difference of creed and caste, the rigid traditions which hedged about his daily life, making it pollution for him even to touch my hand, in a way he held me as a friend. Chiefly I think because, like him, I was an alien in the court, one with no kith nor kin to favour, one whose service to the Nawab was unhindered by thought of family intrigue.

“At last he spoke again, voicing his fears more clearly now, his feeling of treachery afoot—treachery that for all his cunning he had been unable to unmask. Spoke of the Nawab's boy heir, now safely with his mother at the Delhi court, and of the treasure which we had helped

to hide and which must come to the boy should the fort be taken and the Nawab slain.

“ ‘But we four know of it,’ he said, ‘and of us but one, the Nawab himself, can find the secret way. With the aid of these stones, however, and of certain calculations any three of us together might find the secret. See you the Nawab was guarded even in seeking our help.’

“Which indeed was so, since each night, with two deaf mute Abyssinian slaves, he had led the three of us blindfolded, and until we were actually in the passage allowed us to see naught. And when returning from our work with pick and crow, with stone and mortar—I worked as mason then and Mahmud Hussein, as he grumbled, as ‘a mason’s labourer,’—once near the exit we were again blindfolded by these same slaves until we were clear of the palace walls.

“ ‘As he told us,’ went on the Brahman, ‘if he himself were slain, by using the green stones and the inscriptions thereon we others might in combination find again the entrance. But say, Frenchman, what if two of us be slain?’

“I remarked that in that case the treasure would probably remain hidden for ever.

“ ‘Me they will kill of a surety,’ said he. ‘They will slay me also slowly perhaps, to find the secrets that I as minister must surely hold. You—if you fall not in battle—they might spare, being a foreigner, for with them are certain Italians, and they desire to stand well with the Europeans. Therefore have I come this night to tell you where, when I am dead, you may find the stone which was given me.’

“And then he went on to tell me how he had hidden it in the secret recess near the great figure of the god Shiv in the rock-cut temples below the fort.”

And that point was the end of Taylor’s researches that night, as with aching eyes and tired brain he had cast himself down to sleep. Of the end of Gopal Tiwari he knew something from Carter’s remarks and the earlier

uncoded portion of the record. He had been captured, tortured, and finally killed. But whether the rest of the writings would reveal the hiding-place of the stone, or whether after all these years the stone would still be there, or whether Pierre Rivecourt had recovered it himself and then lost it again, these things were as yet hidden.

But when, an hour later, his servant came in with his morning tea and he woke tired-eyed to the golden glory of an Indian morning joyous with the call of birds, the faint breeze of dawn playing about him, his first thought was of the rock temples, and thither he went—knowing nothing definite as yet, but anxious only to look upon the scene of the story and study the surroundings ere he continued his work of deciphering the record.

Dark and gloomy they opened before him, rock-carved entrances overgrown with creeper, hung with twining jungle vine, and in the half-light of the entrances monstrous images of man and beast, myriad-limbed figures and writhing serpents, defaced here and there by the conquering Mussulman, who dealt with such things as Cromwell's Roundheads with the churches of old England. But farther in the images were less damaged, and some were quite untouched—friezes in bas-relief, figures of gods and goddesses, demi-gods, and heroes, all carved from the living rock around, flat-faced and almond-eyed, wasp-waisted and broad-chested, inhuman impassive faces that looked out at you, as Vivian Carter had phrased it, "with dead eyes."

His tread fell silent on the thick dust of the cave temples as he passed from cell to cell of the rock-carved courts, wall and pillar and low ceiling heavy with intricate figuring, little dark nooks with half-seen images, open spaces with kneeling figures of bulls and elephants, here a shattered pillar rich with ornamentation, there a smooth rounded block of stone, earliest representation of the source of life.

Some few images still bore traces of the paint with which they had been daubed ages before, but for the

most part the dark rock was void of colour, since the place had been abandoned ever since the Mussulman invasion, and the following defilement and desecration of the temples bathed in the blood of their slaughtered priests.

A brooding stillness hung about the place—scent of desolation and silence broken only by the fluttering wings of bats disturbed by the unwonted tread of heavy boots,—and accustomed as Taylor was to solitude, the deathliness of the spot touched even his hardened nerves despite the quest that drew him.

At last he reached the innermost court, where in a rock-carved cave at the far end stood the great statue of Shiv—second of the Hindu trinity—representation of the destroying power of the Supreme Being, tutelary deity of half the Hindu faith. Hinduism, besides some three million minor deities, deities of class and clan and village, recognises three main gods—Brahma the creator, Shiva the destroyer, and Vishnu the preserver. Since at heart humanity is monotheistical, each sect cleaves rather to one or other of the trinity; and Brahma's work of creation being finished, he finds but few adherents to-day, the bulk following either Shiv the malevolent, in the hope of placating him, or Vishnu the benevolent, trusting to his kindness to protect them.

And the Hindu of to-day perhaps favours rather the former, together with his feminine attribute Kali—goddess of death and mother of smallpox,—for each deity had his feminine counterpart, Hinduism being nothing without sex, so that Mahadev, “the great God,” as Shiv is commonly called, counts perhaps more followers than any other deity.

Taylor entered the cave and gazed upon the great image, still little defaced by the passage of years, almost unchanged since centuries before, when with labour of crow and fire, painful toil of month and year with chisel and mallet, it had been rough-hewn out of the rock and carven and smoothed and fined to its present shape in days when time was nothing.

The ropes of twisted hair stood high above the impassive face, the six gaunt arms, each with its emblem of godhead, spread halowise about the body, the necklace of skulls about the slim throat, the tapering body and the thin flanks draped below the girdle, the legs instinct with life as they crushed beneath them little writhing figures of men—pigmies compared with the giant above them,—Shiv dancing the dance of death.

To another the imagery of the thing might have caught the fancy, induced wonderment that men could even in their wildest, most insane fancies have ever conceived any vision so innately terrifying as being the God of the blue skies and the April blossom, of the spring buds and the summer rains.

But to Taylor came no such fancies ; to him it was a carven image of a coloured people—just that and nothing more. On its fashioners, on the creed that conceived it, on the mentality that made such a portrayal possible, he reflected not at all. But somewhere near, behind or below this effigy, lay hidden or had lain hidden a tiny piece of carved jade, the finding of which spelt possibilities of wealth such as he had sought all his life.

As yet he had no clue : that would come when he had deciphered yet more of the record. But still he studied the stonework at the base of the image, probing with the blade of his knife into the cracks, seeking any sign of moving stone, of sliding block.

Finally he turned away and retraced his steps through the courts in the direction of his camp, leaving behind him once again the silence and the gloom of the abandoned temples, once thronged with gay-robed temple dancing-girls, with sphinx-faced priests shaven of head and bare of body, passing with silent step among the worshippers, men set apart by their very birth from the common herd, twice-born, to lay hands upon whom was sacrilege unthinkable, no matter what crime they might commit.

And behind him in the shadows the image of Shiv looked out with inscrutable eyes at the retreating figure

in khaki shirt and shorts, putties and boots, the west in every line of figure and dress, as it had looked out on jewel-decked rajah and shaven priest, upon silk-robed woman and cotton-draped peasant, upon mail-clad soldier and flaunting courtesan, immutable, unchangeable, dancing always the dance of death down the ages upon writhing humanity impotent below its feet, the grinning skulls pendant about its neck clattering silently with the rhythmic noiseless tread.

CHAPTER VIII.

HILL PATHS.

"HILLS and valleys—sunshine and blue shadows—a jade lake and cobalt sky. And some people tell you that there is nothing except the material to account for the world."

Stella Nash sat on a rough-piled wall of stones—débris of a breastwork constructed by some regiment out training on the bare crest of Gatacre hill,—all Quetta spread clear below her in the evening light, and before her the Hanna valley, little terraced fields of green, and the warm brown of mud huts under the emerald of fruit-trees. Above the valley the long straight ridge of Zarghun, all the roses and pinks of the palette over shadows of cobalt and madder, closed the far horizon beyond the hills that ringed the Hanna lake, hills of yellow splashed here and there with the reds and greens of disintegrating limestone.

Almost straight below her feet—a sheet of jade broken only by one little conical island rising from its unrippled expanse of vivid colour, shut in on the west by a high battlemented dam of stone at the mouth of the narrow rift, where the waters had once cut their way to the thirsty plain behind—lay the Hanna lake, a jewel in a setting of many-shaded gold and bronze.

"Hills and valleys—a long straight road and a friend on a grey horse," quoted Paul, echoing a remark of hers made the previous day.

"But the friend is no longer on a grey horse. Clad in shorts and chaplis—and the shorts are a bit frayed

too—he's left the long straight road for the winding path up a stony hill," laughed Stella.

"One can't follow straight roads always," replied Paul, leaning back against the rough-piled boulders and filling his pipe. "It's too mechanical a process. Hill paths are necessary sometimes to keep an interest in life. Otherwise one might as well be a machine—something that just goes on and on. A motor takes kindly to a long straight road, but a horse is a finer thing, and only a horse will take you off the road."

"Or a mule."

"Or a mule, as you say. But even that is a bit more alive than a machine. But it would be a dull life if one stuck always to the roads."

"It would. And yet we have to stick to them sometimes—plod along mile after mile, day after dusty day, seeing nothing but the unending road in front and the milestones drifting past, days and weeks and months and years. And going—where?"

"Speaking in parables again, Stella?"

Much intimacy at the Carlos' had finally led them out of the surname stage. It is difficult to remain in it indefinitely with people you really like, when those around address them continually by their Christian names.

"No-o-o," replied Stella slowly. "Not really. Only seeing the things behind the obvious, as it were. Life is a road, isn't it?—sometimes long and sometimes short. Generally dusty and staged by milestones, some pleasing, some painful. All of them getting more and more hazy as they recede, whether the haze is the rose mist of lost romance or the greyiness of still-remembered sorrow. And we don't honestly know where it goes to? And often we'd give our souls to get off it a bit and follow hill paths, flower-strewn tracks under scented pines. And then something we can't see comes and pushes us back on to the road, back into the dust, and the meaningless mechanical tramp.

"'Life,' by Stella Nash. 6d. plain. Half a crown coloured." She laughed whimsically as she broke off.

"Do you always laugh at yourself, Stella?"

"No. I cry sometimes if I happen to take myself seriously, which is a dreadful habit to get into. So generally I laugh, which is better for one. If you take yourself seriously too long, you may come to a stage of self-pity, and that's fatal to everything. Don't you agree?"

"I suppose it is. Certainly it's a good thing to laugh at oneself sometimes. As practical politics, it prevents other people laughing at you too much."

Laughter is pre-eminently a sign of sanity, and both Paul and Stella were distinctly and lucidly sane. Paul had never really suffered, never tasted the gall of real sorrow, whereas Stella had known suffering of the most intense. But where Stella had gained in the process the saving knowledge that when things are at their worst you must either laugh or go under, Paul had realised in the course of a life singularly easy that laughter at oneself is the greatest antidote to self-importance, and though self-centred to some extent he detested anything approaching "side."

But he wondered sometimes, knowing what he did of all Stella had gone through, how she was able to look on life so cheerfully, as people do wonder at others' gaiety if they have never suffered themselves. It is not until you have been really badly hurt yourself that you begin to understand that pain can be borne, and borne too with a smile.

"Cheery Mrs Nash," Quetta called her, and certainly she earned the title. But to Paul she had long been much more than that—had become more and more the some one with whom things could be shared—some one who held the key of a country where none but those she invited might enter—and some one—he began to think—who invited none but him to enter it. There was a whole world of difference between the hours shared with Stella and the hours shared with her and others, and every day this difference seemed more marked.

And Stella too realised something of the same, felt more and more that there were thoughts and moods of hers, hitherto repressed, which found quick sympathy and comprehension from this unassuming quiet man with the determined chin and sensitive mouth, the steady honest eyes, and ready smile. Almost like talking to herself, she felt, the ready understanding of thoughts perhaps only half-voiced, perhaps hardly voiced at all.

“While man and woman yet are incomplete,
I prize the soul where man and woman meet.”

Tennyson's couplet came into her mind as she sat there in the evening sunlight, hands clasped round her crossed knees, one neat foot tapping the rough stones, her slim but well-formed figure silhouetted against the cloudless sky, vivid blue with just a tinge of gold stealing into it as the sun sank lower over the plain. She looked down at the man a little below her, seated at the foot of the wall, tanned knees below the khaki shorts and sunburnt throat above the loose collar of his tennis-shirt, which showed to the woman sitting above him a little glimpse of skin below the tan, as white and whiter than her own for all his dark hair.

Not a bad picture of Paul Merriman, she thought. Man, yes, essentially male, respected and well spoken of by his fellows, and yet showing at every turn that nameless something, that refinement of perception and feeling, more common gift of the other sex.

Six months now of very happy companionship, of continually growing intimacy on the long road. It would be lonely when he went again, as he would soon. Life is not too lavish in its gift of friends to those who, like Stella and so many more, seem cast for the gipsy part.

And at the thought of his going something inside her stirred, a little movement of feelings which she believed buried long years before, a clamorous calling for a sweetness that she had thought done with once for all.

She broke in upon his silence as he sat there sucking at his pipe, eyes on the naked hills before him, gaunt bare rock and stone transfigured to fairyland in the evening light.

"Eyes on the far horizon, as ever . . . dreamer? What do you see there?"

He looked up at her smiling.

"Nothing really, Stella. I was only wondering as I often do at the wonderful beauty the border hills can take on in certain lights. Rock and stone and sunburnt mud, and now. . . ." He swept his pipe across the riot of colour. "It is wonderful, isn't it? Always the same from Peshawur to Quetta and into the heart of Waziristan. I wonder if I shall find Mahsudland as enthralling now as I found it before."

Again the something in Stella tugged at nerves she had long thought dead. The idea of Paul far away in Waziristan, lonely in the heart of a savage land, a land whose spirit breathed only the knife and naked rock, the rifle crack at dawn and hot noon and stilly dusk, the lonely skyline piquets, the convoy ambush, the pressed withdrawal, the hundred and one such things she had read of. And yet she had only known him six short months—only six little months since they had met as strangers in the boat-train, and Carlos had introduced him to her.

"When does your regiment go?" she asked in a steady voice.

"September or October, probably. We've no definite orders so far. Anyway, that makes another three months yet, which is something. Three more months of civilisation . . . three more months of the fleshpots."

But in his mind was the thought that it was only three more months of Stella, and Stella sensed the unspoken thought as she and he so often felt things that were not voiced at all.

Only three months more of companionship on that road she had spoken of, and then back again to the dusty, lonely, mechanical tramp she had just visual-

ised, watching the dreary milestones slip by. Well, at least this milestone should recede with something of the rose haze of romance, said Stella to herself, something of sweetness to look back to as the years sped on, something to treasure, this joy of friendship not so often given.

"It will be a gap when you're gone, Paul. No one to listen to subconscious Stella's thinks, no one to take me off the 'long straight road' up the hill paths. I shall miss my guide who taught me to see the things behind the 'obvious,' even in these naked hills."

"I'm selfishly glad that you will," he replied, knocking out the ashes of his pipe and turning round. "I want you to, because then when I come back on leave next year things will be all the nicer. Because I'm coming back here; Carlos asked me only the other day. I believe they give us three months from Wazzerland—one of the compensations for living in the back of beyond. Stella . . . tell me what do you make of life?"

"What do you mean, 'what do I make of life?' " she asked, genuinely puzzled for the moment.

"I mean, what do you think it all is? Is it just chance, or is it a big plan of sorts worked out for a definite ending by Someone who really understands the game? Or are we just puppets—playthings of a blind fate?"

"Oh no. I think—no, that's not the right word, I feel really—not so clearly that I can argue about it—but like one feels things sometimes—that it's a plan worked out properly with a definite result to be reached. I think things are meant to happen—the trouble is that we don't always see what they are, and so they hurt sometimes, when if we really understood they wouldn't hurt so much."

"That really comes to much the same thing—namely, that we aren't free agents. Things are arranged for us beforehand, and we can't help anything."

"No, that's *Kháyyám*. My idea is that the ground plan is worked out, but the details are left to us to make

the whole scheme more or less beautiful as we take this or that line."

"In other words—to reverse the usual saying—'Providence rough hews our ends, shape them as we will!'"

"Yes, that's rather what I think."

"Then, for instance, you think that you and I were meant to meet, that our meeting is something in the whole scheme?"

"Absolutely. You and I have been flung together, and having met have got to know each other—well, at least better than most people get to know each other in the ordinary way. That's meant, but what it's meant for neither you nor I can say. But as to what use you or I may make of this, that *is* our business, our little contribution to a scheme which is so big that we can't see it at all for its very immensity."

"I wonder if you're right, Stella? I've never looked at it that way before. I must think over the idea. But I'm glad you think we were meant to meet. I've always felt that since I found you had that other piece of jade. Like you, I think the whole thing is a big scheme, although I'm hanged if I understand what it's for. It's all so tangled and unequal. Some people find happiness while others seem to get nothing but misery."

"You've got to have lights and shades to make a perfect picture, haven't you? We'd rather be the high lights, all of us, but some one has to make the shades, otherwise there'd be no high lights. It may hurt now, but some day, somewhere, when the picture is finished, we'll understand and rejoice that such of us as have been cast for the shadow parts have played the game and helped. That's really what life is, isn't it?—a lesson in 'playing the game,' trying to make the world a little cleaner, our neighbour a little happier. And some of us have to get hurt in the process, but the game is worth the hurts in the end."

"But why should any of us get hurt? That's what has me."

"Because one only gains strength through getting hurt. A man who never undergoes hardship gets soft, and his manhood goes, and then what is he? Man is so made that unless he has to face odds, maybe odds of battle, maybe odds of fate, but always odds, he gets flabby and worthless. And the same with a woman. A woman that has never had to face odds—odds of suffering seem generally the woman's part—gets selfish, mentally flabby if you like. It's the game, but it's hard sometimes."

"D—d hard, Stella," said Paul, thinking as he spoke of those wasted years of hers. And his heart hardened against the dead man he had never seen as he looked up at Stella's profile, clear-cut against the sky, the little pucker between her brows as her grey eyes looked straight before her over the blue distances, dim already with the evening shadows, grey eyes unseeing as they looked back down that long road with its milestones hazy with the greyiness of still-remembered sorrow that she had spoken of.

And as he looked at her he felt as he had felt once or twice before with her, that longing to make life smoother, easier, that desire to protect, that wish to stand between the roughness of the world and one woman, which in every decent man is the forerunner and later on the complement of love, the germ instinct of the chivalry to the other sex which is the innate birthright of the Anglo-Saxon man—which crops up again and again even in strata of unimaginable debasement.

Then she looked down at him again, her eyes clear once more, and the laughter coming back to her lips.

"I'm getting serious, and there is self-pity in the air! And we agreed that that is fatal. Also it's getting late, and Marjorie has people coming to dinner."

He got to his feet and held out his hands to help her down from her perch, and touching them lightly as she slipped to the ground Stella felt again—though to save her very life she would never have acknowledged it—that something stirring again within her at the touch of

a man's hand, a man whom six months ago she had never even heard of.

"Back to the long straight road once more," she said half seriously as they followed the little winding path down the hill, to where, in the growing dusk, the Hanna road showed a long line of poplars above the water-channels. "You lead me up the hill track—I take you back to the dusty road. I wonder is that always the woman's part?"

"It depends on what the woman sees at the end of the road."

"What she sees at the end of the road? Yes, I believe you're right, Paul." She stopped and looked up the valley as they passed the projecting spur of gaunt rock which had hidden it from them ever since they left the crest. "Rose-pink mountains and glint of sunlit snow—shadows of mauve and violet, and the distant light of a star. But what is it when you get there? Does the road ever reach it really—or is it only barren naked rocks with the colours receding and receding all the way to—to—infinity?"

"No. The rocks end some day always, and then you get into valleys of turf and flowers under the snows that make you forget there ever was such a thing as a rock—iris and peach blossom, violets and climbing rose. And nothing like so far as infinity. I'll take you there some day and show you if you don't believe."

And Stella Nash, as she led on down the narrow path, was painfully aware that the Stella who, several years before, had armoured her heart in steel forged in the molten furnace of suffering and chilled with the icy waters of disillusion, was being somewhat jostled by the ghost of a dead and buried Stella, new risen from her grave, a Stella who clamoured for this man to take her by the hand and lead her into those valleys of blossom he had sketched—the far valleys of infinity where the parallel lines meet, and love walks abroad clad in iridescent mist of rose.

CHAPTER IX.

DIDEH-I-BADSHAH.

"I ALWAYS thought 'Fifi' had something or other up his sleeve with his bit of jade and his papers. He was everlastingly poring over them. Used to watch him sometimes in the hot weather when he couldn't sleep, reading them over time and time again. Must have known most of them by heart. And now I've seen the things, I'm sure there's something behind them, though what it is I'm not clear. Interesting old cove Rivecourt must have been. Saw a bit of scrapping too one way and another. The first part of the pamphlet is chock-full of battle fights—good old cut-and-thrust type mixed up with airy interludes of beauteous dark-eyed damsels and bow-strings and poison and all the other frills of the East of his day."

Monocloid sat at his untidy table, half the débris swept on to the floor to make space for the faded papers he had spread out in front of him, the papers which he had found among Vivian Carter's belongings and sent home to the dead man's mother. Apparently they conveyed nothing to her, for she had sent them out again at Monocloid's request when in April he had first seen Paul's jade fragment and his rapid brain had conceived the idea that perhaps there was something of interest to be nosed out.

They had arrived the previous mail, and Monocloid had spent the best part of a week in reading them through. To-day Paul had come in after playing tennis at the Carlos' to see the papers, whose arrival had been

casually mentioned to him by Monocloid at the club a couple of days before.

Paul had cleared a chair, and found an unoccupied few inches of floor-space on which to deposit his tennis-racquet. He was filling his pipe as Monocloid spoke, and wondering how any one on earth could produce coherent results out of the chaos in which Brown lived. Being of a passably orderly disposition himself, Monocloid's room, with its heterogeneous piles of gear, its heaped-up books and papers, its litter of tools, weapons, motor parts, and bits and scraps of equipment, was an unceasing revelation. But then like all rooms it was a fair guide to its owner's mind, crammed with varied items of information on every conceivable subject; and just as Monocloid could produce if wanted any particular odd job item from the chaos of his possessions, so could he produce from the heaped storehouse of his mind any particular piece of knowledge which might help the work in hand.

"All in French, I suppose," said Paul, as he lighted his pipe.

"Yeps. Seems to be in two parts. The first is fairly straightforward, and deals with his adventures prior to and during the siege of some place called Taragurh, a fortress of sorts down in Central India, where he was in the pay of a Nawab bloke called Badulla. It's interesting reading enough, and the old joss seems to have had an observant eye and a ready pen. Also he appears to have sized up the East pretty fair. No flies on Mr Pierre Rivecourt, I should say.

"The siege seems to have been a messy job one way and another. The Mahrattas rounded 'em up and then sat tight round the place, finally getting in one night, chiefly, according to old Rivecourt, by the assistance of some swine inside the fort. But he doesn't make it quite clear who it was. Then in the final scrum somebody pushed a spear into him, and he only got away with his life, thanks to some dago adventurers who were with the other side. They carted him off to Poona eventu-

ally, and when he patched up again the Mahratta chiefs tried to get him to take on with them. He refused that job, and so they pushed him into a prison of sorts—didn't do him too badly, as a matter of fact. However, after some months of that he managed to get loose again, and finally contrived to get away. Then he drifted to the French possessions on the East Coast, and settled down for a bit, apparently with the idea, from what he says, of going back to Taragurh some day. But he doesn't say what for, and that's queer, because the Mahrattas had taken the place, and the Nawab was killed, so he wouldn't have been exactly among friends."

"What happened to him in the end?"

"Apparently he settled in Trichinopoly, and married the daughter of some French merchant, who presented him with a replica of herself called Vivienne. The girl eventually married an Englishman in the Company's service, bloke called Carter, and the result, a couple of generations later—was 'Fifi.' That much I had from Fifi himself, and I asked old Mrs Carter to refresh me on the point."

"And what has he got to say about the jade?"

"Nothing—just blink. That's the weird part. But we may find something farther on about that."

"Why? Haven't you read all the stuff?"

"Yes, I have. It's in two parts, though. The first half is what I've been telling you—all about his adventures. Graphic sort of scribe. One part is real journalese—where the Mahrattas catch the Nawab's boss minister, Brahmin of the name of Gopal Tiwari—funny how those Mussulman rulers used to take on Hindu financial advisers—same like the Government of India to-day—hereditary aptitude at cutting pay-rolls, I suppose. Anyway they proceeded to question the old gent, and as he wasn't mentioning the locality of the treasury over much, they tied him up nicely in a sack head down over a brazier of charcoal, resuscitating him kindly-like from time to time to ask if his memory was getting

better, and prodding him in between whiles with bits of hot iron."

"Nice kindly souls they must have been," put in Paul. "What happened?"

"Old bird's memory got worse instead of better, and finally they got quite peeved about it. Then one of them jabbed his hot spear-point in a bit too far, and that was the end of Gopal. He's very insistent on Gopal, is old Rivecourt. Can't quite make out why. But the main part of the yarn is that the Mahrattas didn't find the Nawab's money-bags, and then they wanted to try Rivecourt's memory. Lucky for him the other dagoes on the Mahratta side chipped in, and after a bit of a flare-up carried the day."

"Does Rivecourt say anything about the Nawab's treasure? Do you think he knew where it was? or if there was any?"

"Not a word. But there must have been some. All those old chiefs had tidy bundles of stuff put away. They used the charcoal and the hot spear-point game all right themselves most of the time. It was half the stock-in-trade of the respectable mercenary soldier of the East. Attila and his crowd found it much more practical than the modern system of pay-babus to keep an army bright and cheery."

"Well, what's the second part all about? Don't think much of your hidden treasure stunt and your Stevenson scent so far."

"The second part is rather odd. It's a very stilted badly-written account of Hindu customs in Southern India, all about caste and ceremonies. Nothing whatever to do with the first part of the story. Very incoherent, and seems to have no particular beginning and no end—just dithers on and suddenly stops. But I've an idea that it doesn't really mean what it says."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, I think that it may turn out to be some sort of code giving us the rest of the yarn—the parts he didn't want any one else to know."

Paul sat up in his chair and looked at Monocloid. He wondered if this was merely a harebrained fancy or something with a substratum of proof behind it. One is never quite sure of Monocloid's ideas on first acquaintance with them. They dart off at tangents—expand—vanish—resuscitate—all in the most inexplicable way.

“What gives you that idea now?”

“Lots of things. Firstly, the way Fifi used to pore over the writing. He couldn't have been doing it over the early chapters. They're interesting enough to read once or twice but not more. They wouldn't make you sit up night after night. Then secondly, the chapters on Hindu customs run straight on from the rest without any kind of a stop, all in the same rough copy-book. Why?”

Paul could think of no particular reason why they should. Certainly one would not usually carry straight on from a diary of rather stirring events to an account which—according to Monocloid, and he was no mean judge of the worth of a story—was a somewhat dull and prosy description of native customs of the south of India.

“Then the whole thing gives one the impression of being rather forced—pulled together sort of,—makes you think of one of those missing-word competitions. Sentences dragged in that don't seem to belong, don't even quite make sense sometimes. Quite likely only parts of it are meant to be read. But question is, what parts? Lastly, here and there he makes rather forced allusions to jade. Now I don't believe that jade is a thing that figures much in Hindu ceremonies. They're not much in my line, but jade seems foreign to 'em. My belief is that the writing conceals some reference to the bits of jade you've got hold of, perhaps gives us the meaning of them or the use they're intended for.”

Monocloid got up and went over to his locked despatch-case, from which he extracted the two pieces of stone, and laid them on the table.

He picked up one and held it close to his eyeglass, whistling the while. " 'Dideh-i-Badshah'—'The sight of the King.' Old joss Rivecourt always talks about the Nawab as 'le Roi.' Wonder what the blue blazes that's got to do with the setting of the sun? "

He poised the stone in one hand, the other thrust into his trouser-pocket rattling a bunch of keys. Then he turned on Paul, eyes all alight.

"Ever been to Delhi, old bean? "

"Once," said Paul, accustomed to Monocloid's wandering trains of thought. What was he getting at now?

"Go round the mouldering ruins ever? "

"Just had a squint at them—the fort, Purana Kila, the Kutb, and so on. Why? "

"I was there for the durbar when 'Jarge Panjum,' as Jack sepoy calls him, came out. He and the Queen sat in the fort for the mob to have a look at them. Supposed to be a good thing to look on the king according to the old Hindu traditions. The Moghul emperors used to have a sort of daily showing too. I guess it was really to remind the crowd that they had a king, and just to show he hadn't been poisoned during the night. The King and Queen sat in the same little old window that Shahjahan and company displayed their royal selves in. Got it? "

"Got what? What *are* you driving at? "

"Well, the window, of course. The 'Badshahi nazar,' or the 'drushti' as the Sanscrit has it. All of which means the same as 'Dideh-i-Badshah'—the act of seeing the king. Hence the place in which you see him. Wonder if there's a book on Taragurh? "

Paul was sitting hopelessly in the dark, trying to fathom where on earth Monocloid's thoughts were drifting. Evidently there was some connection, but it was Monocloidesque in the extreme, and he said so forcibly.

Monocloid took out his eyeglass and studied it. Then he looked at Paul, and finally returned the monocle to its normal position.

"A window's a thing you see a setting sun from,

isn't it ? See it from lots of other places too. Still it's a connection. If you want to register a place, you might say that it was visible from a certain window at a certain time, mightn't you ? ”

Paul caught at the thread then.

“ You mean that this inscription refers to some definite place in Taragurh, some window, say, where the Nawab or whoever he was used to sit.”

“ Yep. Just that. Something was wanted to be marked down, and one of the guiding-points to find it from was some well-known place like the King's window in Delhi fort. And the particular time to spot it was just at sunset. Perhaps a shadow.”

Paul got up and went to the table, picked up the other piece of jade, his piece with the writing about the Tower of Victory, and turned on Monocloid, now stretched in a long chair.

“ And this ? ”

“ Lots of old forts have a ‘ Tower of Victory.’ Where you and I get a putty medal for chasing the Mohmand, or being shelled by Fritz, the old-fashioned kinglet of the shiny East used to build Towers of Victory. First design, pile of heads from the other side. Later types—when they found the heads didn't keep well—was a stone and mortar stunt. Then they took to inlaid tiles and carved marble. Same idea all the time.”

“ And the ‘ moon of Ramzan ’ ? ”

“ All samee like setting sun. Gives a definite time to get your indicating line. Looks bally like it anyway. That's why I think the old Frenchman put more than meets the eye into that disjointed outfit of his about Dravidian customs. He had something to say that he didn't want every one to know.”

“ I believe you're right. But what it is ? ”

“ Probably boodle—gold—pearls—anything in that line. Perhaps the ancestral crown or Eastern equivalent. Second best royal waistcoat with ruby buttons, or the Nawab's Sunday walking-stick with diamond handle. The Indian loves burying things. Knew three

sepoys who buried a pip-squeak dud one time—from sheer habit. Then they lighted a cooking-fire on top and went through the roof. C.O. got quite stuffy about it. Ever heard the yarn about the recruit in . . .”

Paul pulled him back to the point.

“What are you going to do with the papers now?”

“Eh, what? Oh, the papers! Why, get hold of a book of sorts on Taragurh. Gazetteer or some other Babu product and see if it’s got a Tower of Victory first. If it has I’ll bet an odd rupert or so that we’re on the right track. Then we’ll sit down and have a dive at the story and see if we can get at what ‘Fifi’s’ great-grandfather or whatever he was was really driving at when he scrawled all that tosh about Hindu funerals.”

Paul took up the manuscript and read a page or two of the fine writing. As Monocloid said, it was disjointed in places and certainly not interesting. And then somehow his mind ran away with him, as it often did, and he seemed to have left Monocloid’s quarters and to be in an old fortress in the moonlight of a tropical night. Figures passed him now and then—mail-clad men with faces swathed in turban ends, curved swords and long curious matchlocks, little round shields, and pointed steel caps with fringe of mail at back. Gaunt swarthy men, and here and there the thick lips of negroes.

They passed him with soft chink of mail and swish of leather, and then came another figure similarly clad, but walking as the white man walks—hooked nose under blue eyes, cat’s whisker moustaches, lean face, and sinewy throat. And with him came another man in the flowing draperies of a Hindu priest, shawl of saffron about his shoulders, and wooden sandals on his bare feet, hollow-eyed, and ascetic hairless face, caste marks vivid on the pale brow under the shaven crown.

Glint of moonlight on mail and weapon, gleam of moonlight on polished marble of dome and pillar below the rough-hewn walls whereon glimmered red cressets and armed men paced to and fro. Dark shadow of mosque and palace wall, paved marble walks ghostly white in

the moon's radiance, discreet glimmer of tiny oil-lamps behind trellised windows.

Then the broken shadows of a ruined building, dim figures within, and out into the bright moonlight came a kingly figure of a man, rope of fine pearls round the folds of the muslin turban, carefully trimmed beard about the firm lips, and heavy eyebrows above the piercing eyes. A royal figure of a man in his fine mail, every point simple, plain leather, plain steel, but leather and steel and muslin all alike of a quality in keeping with the pearls.

Paul heard the greetings, the deep-toned voice of the bearded man, the slow utterances of the Brahman, the European's fluent Persian. Two other dark figures appeared in the moonlight, then a third joined them, and the party disappeared into the ruined building, and Paul was alone again in the moonlight.

Then he was aware of a shadow growing about him, and realised that the moon was just passing behind a tall building he had not hitherto remarked, fluted walls and little windows up the shaft of a tower that tapered gracefully into the silver sky.

Then his smouldering cigarette burnt his fingers, and with an exclamation he found himself again looking at the yakhdans, the old Khirgiz hat, the cartridge-belts and chaplis, Atmospheric Algy and the miniature lathe, the tumbled disorder of Monocloid's room, and the owner himself dozing opposite.

Paul sat up with a jerk. He was getting as bad as Adrian Brown, dozing off like that. He looked at his watch, and realised that he would have to hurry if he was to get back in time to change for mess. Davis' car, of which he was part owner, was none too certain a starter at the best of times.

Then as he got up he realised that he was still holding his piece of jade that he had taken off the table. "Tower of Victory." The flowing writing, with its graceful curves, stared at him, and once again he seemed to see the rounded shaft and fluted walls, the half-glimpsed

Arabic inscriptions, the long shadow in the moonlight.

Could the weird thing then make you dream as well as think ? Rubbish on the face of it !

He laid it and the papers on the table and stirred Monocloid, who woke up again and looked at him drowsily. He had been up most of the previous night with the second half of the Frenchman's record.

"Time I was getting along, old thing. I've got Carlos coming to dinner. It's band night. I believe you've got somewhere on the track with those papers. Let me know as soon as you get to work and I'll come and lend a hand."

Monocloid stretched, and then got up.

"Come along on Saturday after lunch. May have something out by then. Going to have another shot to-night with the second part. How's the old bus pulling ? "

He followed Paul out of the door to where the car stood. The pair of them got plenty of exercise ere she chugged into life, and Paul, slipping in the clutch, turned out of the drive into the main road downhill towards his bungalow.

CHAPTER X.

PARALLEL LINES.

PAUL and Stella sat in the shadow of a tumbled heap of rocks below the long outcrop which joins Kitchener Hill to the main mass of Murdar. The air was warm and still, though the sun was already sinking low, and the wide expanse of the Quetta plain was half-veiled in a thin haze of dust. A silence hung over the gaunt landscape, and the slopes below them, where the ground fell away to the tree-fringed edges of the cantonment, were bare of life, save for some little way off a tiny encampment of nomads—black blanket shelters, a few wandering goats, and a grazing camel or two.

Below their feet, winding away to lose itself in the featureless plain ahead, was a long ravine, strewn with water-worn stones, and with banks undercut by the action of the torrents that swept down it in the occasional rains, though now it was as parched and dusty as the rest of the savage hills around.

The hillsides above them were bare for the most part, here and there just a dried-up tree, or a withered shrub or two, yellowed tufts of sun-dried grass, and coarse growths of rock plants. The slopes of Murdar shimmered in the sunlight, the black nakedness of its summit vivid against the cloudless sky.

An uninviting landscape, most people would say. And yet even now, half-veiled in dust haze, it appealed to the man and woman sitting there, who had learnt to love it for what it showed them, the beauties hidden from other less discerning eyes, the vivid colours that

the Sun—Magician of the East—paints into rock and mud and scorched earth for those who have eyes to see.

Learnt to love it too because of what it had brought them—friendship of the best—rarest gift of the gods, given sparingly and to so few. The naked rocks and the gaunt hills had turned for them into fairy palaces more beautiful than the most wondrous marble-pavilioned gardens that ever Eastern emperor planned for his love's delight.

But the gods give grudgingly, and always there lurks in the dim half-seen background behind the gifts the unspoken fear that sooner or later something will come to break the charm—that the sight of human happiness may rouse the jealousy of Olympus and call down swift action lest the little mites of a tiny earth should force the gates of heaven and enter unbidden into the fulness of bliss.

The old pagan foreboding had clung heavy at Stella's heart all the evening as she had listened to Paul's words. Such a very perfect friendship it had been—sympathy and understanding at every turn—kinship of mind and soul such as she had sometimes dreamed of but never found. Long days and weeks, months indeed now, of a companionship almost ideal, ideal almost, yet not quite. Friendship that had asked for nothing save just that companionship which she was only too ready to pour out with lavish hands. Friendship that was all of sunlight, friendship such as Stella had craved through the long lonely years, that utilised only those finer attributes of sex difference, employed only those fundamental differences of thought and vision that make a true friendship between man and woman the most wonderful thing in life, since each fills up what is lacking in the other, and each, using the other's eyes, sees open before them realms hitherto all unknown.

She had realised all along that it could not last for ever, that some day something more would supervene, that even Paul would crave for a something deeper than mere friendship, however perfect. But she had resolutely

refused to envisage the future, had kept her eyes firmly fixed on the present, lived for the day alone, for the day with its concrete happenings, and sometimes for the night with its dreams of what might not be.

But now she knew that a term was fixed, and that soon, this very evening here under the shadow of these hills where they had come to be so much to each other, the knife would fall, fall in the same inevitable way, when the man in Paul would want more, would ask for more, for that which her whole being craved to give him, for that which the subconscious Stella, who had fashioned herself dim ideals in the years of her girlhood's happiness, and clung to them the more in the years of trial, could never give him.

She had realised it more each day of late, and blinded herself the more rigorously to the knowledge in the passionate desire to snatch just another brief moment of happiness ere fate should drive her back again to the long straight road and the dusty milestones.

"Some day I'll take you there and show you." His words on Gatacre Hill came back to her mind. Dear God, why had he come so late—too late? And now she must suffer, and, worse still, he must suffer, and suffer too because of her. And she knew then a new pain, the pain beyond all pain that comes if we have to hurt those whom we love, when they ask for bread and we can only offer a stone.

She turned upon him as at last she realised fully where his words were leading—

"Stop, Paul; *please, please stop.*"

And as she said it her whole soul cried out against checking even for an instant his words which she craved to hear—his voicing of facts already so well known and so treasured—that he wanted her more than all the world beside, that he wanted her even as she wanted him, with every fibre of her being, body, and mind, and soul.

"Why, what is it, Stella, dearest?" His eyes were full of wonder.

"Listen, Paul. You say you love me. And I will tell you what is just the simplest truth—that I love you with the whole of me, love you now, and will always love you. But, Paul, infinity is ever so far off, not here in our hills, and so I can't . . . *can't* . . . marry you."

"But, Stella, Stella, why? What ever do you mean?"

"Because, Paul, I'm not what you think I am—what all the world thinks I am. You see, I'm married still. I ought to have told you long, long ago, but I was a coward. I did so crave some little happiness, some little space with you."

The whole vibrant tone of her voice was a caress on the last word, though she did not deliberately mean it to be. But it seemed to the man before her that the light had gone out of the sun-bathed landscape as he listened to her and knew then that she spoke from the dark gates which she had entered again, this time of her own will for the sake of her ideals. And once more the other part of him came to the surface—the part that only asked to keep the sunshine in Stella's eyes, to spend his life to make her happy—asking nothing, giving all.

He slipped his arm around her shoulders and drew her nearer to him, looking into her tortured eyes as he fought down the wild desire to draw her still closer and press her lips to his with kisses of the most passionate.

"Tell me, Stella. I don't—I can't—understand. I only know I love you, and that you're lonely beyond all belief."

Stella, crushing down just that same desire to let go, to cling to him and raise her lips to his, to yield to that overpowering impulse to sacrifice everything she had hitherto held sacred for the sake of this man whom she loved and wanted more than she had ever believed even possible, felt his arm trembling, but there was no shadow of passion in his hold, only comfort and protection, that paradoxically made her long for him a hundred times the more.

"Tell me, Stella."

And sitting there with his arms about her as she

had longed to have them so often and crushed the desire down as frequently, she told him, slow words, broken at times as the longing within her to give herself to this man whom she loved so intensely fought with ideals that refused to be jettisoned, ideals that had become almost part of her very self.

Told him some little of her earlier life, of the years of sorrow before the war, of the final crash in 1915. Told him of the lifeless war years spent in seeking forgetfulness, and of the relief when 1917 brought her freedom once again, when she learnt that her husband had passed the gate where all accounts are finally audited. Told him all that, frankly, simply, in little hopeless sentences as he sat ever with his arm about her, silent, every nerve under control at cost fully known only to himself and his Maker, and half-glimpsed by the woman beside him.

Told him how in 1918 the first doubt broke upon her when she received a package of things belonging to her late husband, forwarded anyhow from a base office, little personal effects. Of how as she unpacked them, not knowing what or whence they were, she had not recognised them, and wondered who had sent them and why. Then found the enclosed memo telling her what they were supposed to be. Of how presently turning over the pages of the pocket-book the entries in it made her understand the simple mistake—that some one had sent her the effects of her husband's cousin of the same name and initial. So simple! "Captain J. Nash." Only, to the woman who opened them, the fact that "J." meant in this case "Julian" instead of "John" as the sender had believed, made a difference that was not measurable by any finite standard—just the whole difference between peace and purgatory.

Hitherto she had made no inquiries, sought no news of the man who had spoilt her life, and gone out of it in 1915, leaving no smallest trace of sweetness, since he had killed her love, crushed it into the mire so long and so deep that it had died utterly; gone out of her

life as suddenly as he had entered it, leaving only gall and wormwood, the bitter waters of tears, and the undying memory of suffering which had bitten deep into her soul, bitten in beyond hope of eradication.

Then she went on to tell him of the days of doubt as she made inquiries through a friend—the only one she had kept up with in South Africa—of fruitless letters to record offices—of the miserable time before she got definite news, wondering whether she should tell any of her friends at home who had never met her husband—of that day of utter blackness in early 1919 when the letter with the South African stamp that had followed her from France to London and half-way round England told her the news she had dreaded to hear, told her definitely that the whole thing had been a mistake, that the casualty reported to her in 1917 had been her husband's unmarried cousin, Julian Nash, and how, by some clerical error in a record office, the name of her husband had been substituted.

Then she went on to tell him of the darkness that had swept down upon her again, of her doubts as to the right course of action, of her final decision to leave things alone for the present, to leave her few friends like the Carlos in ignorance, letting them believe her still, as they had believed her and as she had believed herself for nearly two years, a widow; of the correspondence with the friend in South Africa which had finally resulted in her discovery that her husband had gone to Malaya, probably to join a cousin of his, by name Nash-Taylor.

“You see, Paul, I asked only to forget, and forgetfulness was impossible if at every turn I had had to be as before, pointed out as some one with a husband somewhere or other unknown. Just going on as ‘Mrs Nash—widow’ was so easy, and hurt no one. At least I didn’t think it would ever hurt any one”—the pain in her voice was piteous to listen to,—“because I thought I’d done with love for ever. And now I’m punished, Paul, for I met you and I let you get to love me when

I could have stopped it at the very beginning. But I liked you ; then I longed for friendship, your friendship, and craved it more each day. And I wouldn't say the words that would have saved you before it was too late, because I wanted you selfishly, wanted you for myself when I had nothing to give you. Put it off each day until it was too late, put it off till now. Life offered me so little that I clung to what there was, and then I found the little getting so great that I clung to it the more, wouldn't let it go, and now I've got to make you suffer, Paul.

"I've done you wrong, Paul," she continued slowly, "but I shall suffer now that I have to go back to the long straight road again, alone, the more alone for your companionship I've had these late months, something I had never even dreamed of, something so very perfect. And you will go from me, hating me because I've not been straight with you. And that will be something more to my punishment. I didn't think fate could be so cruel."

"Hate you, Stella ? " he said hoarsely. "Hate you ? Stella, don't you realise yet that you are all the world to me ; that I love you with all that's in me ; that I just worship you ? Look at me, Stella, and tell me that you do understand that. That whatever may come to us, one thing is unchangeable, unchanged, your love and mine."

But Stella sat still, cowering in his arms, her hands nervously plucking at a little withered branch of flowering shrub, the last faded remnants of the once sweet-smelling white blossoms now dusty fragments on the dried-up stem. Image of life, of Stella's hope, dead and withered and gone.

"Look at me, Stella," and his arms tightened about her.

And once more desire sprang up again in her, and the pulses hammered in her throat, as she turned her eyes from the hazy landscape before her, and looked up into the face which for weeks now had haunted her

waking and dreaming moments, gazed into the grey eyes under the dark brows, and saw for one brief instant his lips ere they closed on hers; then knew her whole body call for him as her mind and soul had called to his these many weeks, crave for his arms never to leave her, to give him all herself in completest surrender.

With a little sob her head sank on his shoulder, and she lay quiet, trembling, as, himself again, he soothed her, caressing the thick coils of her hair, speaking broken words of comfort as she nestled there, her face buried in his rough coat.

"Paul," she moaned, "don't—don't make it too hard for me. God knows how much I want you, but it can't, it mustn't be. You and I have got to play the game, haven't we?"

And she knew as she spoke how very, very little it would take to drive all thoughts of the game from her mind, saw depths within her that she had never even glimpsed before, realised what frail things were the defences she had built, knew the strength of the awakened forces that throbbed in her veins chafing at the least control, felt too that the man who held her realised them also, and wondered dimly if he would use his power to break down the last vestige of her hold.

But instead he bent down again and kissed her hair—reverently, and as she realised that for the moment anyway he would not use the power that he must know he held, she understood that the faith she had cherished in the face of unceasing disillusion, the belief that there were some decent men still left in the world, was well founded, and knew then that his love had stood one proof, even of fire, of the fire that smouldered still in his veins and hers.

And the two of them sat silent there, watching the lengthening shadows over gaunt rock and stone-strewn earth, seeing the sun sink behind the shoulder of Chiltan flinging long straight rays of misty golden light through the purple dustiness of the hot air, as the grey formless haze grew about the mountain's foot. His arm was still

about her, and her face still nestled in his coat, for, as Rider Haggard says so truly, "when the storm is beating up the herds close together but cease their calling."

And so with human beings too, when sorrow and pain come down too deep for speech we only want one thing, the knowledge of some one close to us, some one to cling to, some one to feel with us as we stand in the dark gates of suffering.

Then presently Paul's thoughts began to take form again as tingling nerves came back to life after the numbing shock. After all, what did it matter—the man had gone out of Stella's life years and years before? Left her under conditions that abolished every claim he could ever have had upon her. Left her without news, without the least line, taken no trouble even to let her know he was still alive after the war. Paul didn't know much about the intricacies of the law, but he had vague ideas about something called "desertion" that seemed to be connected with divorce. Surely if ever woman had claim to divorce, legally and morally, Stella had. There might be technicalities to fulfil, time required which would delay their marriage; they might have to wait a bit longer, but still that didn't matter much. Evidently Stella didn't understand her position properly. No; things would come all right presently.

"Stella, sweetheart, listen. Why do you say you can't marry me? I don't understand. He's gone now. He can't have any claim on you any more after all you've told me. You don't want him, for you love me. We'll fix things up as soon as we can, won't we?"

And he drew her closer to him, as he buried his face in the fragrance of her hair, trying to comfort her as she lay there in his arms, every feeling crushed and every nerve racked with the pain of it, and all her being crying out for surrender as the subconscious Stella clung still to the tattered banner of her ideals in this sudden storm that had wellnigh swept her off her feet.

Then as she was silent he turned her face up towards

him, looking down into the grey eyes all overshadowed, and on the parted lips vivid against the sudden pallor of her face. And all the man's craving for possession swept over him once more—the culmination of the long days and weeks of hunger for the one woman, hitherto only half-felt, indistinct under the surface of camaraderie, of friendship, of finer higher love such as friendship between man and woman turns to inevitably—at the end. And roughly this time he pulled her to him, covering her face with kisses, kissing her eyes, her lips, her long slim throat, with all the hot passion of a nature normally rigidly restrained.

And Stella, unresisting in his arms, wondered if the storm would pass ere she broke, if the passion of the man which lay behind these kisses which half of her—and that by far the stronger half of her just now—hoped would never stop—would sweep her out of her depth for good and all, leaving her ideals tattered sea-wrack on a receding beach. The subconscious Stella swam up to the surface in one last despairing effort.

"Paul! Be good to me! Won't you help me a little? Paul, it *can't* be! Don't make me false to myself. Let me talk to you a little," she panted.

And at the appeal of her pain-swept eyes, the more normal Paul came back, and he choked down the hot waves that had swept over him as he whispered hoarsely—

"Did I hurt you, sweetheart? I didn't mean to. Honest, I didn't. But I want you so."

And as his kisses ceased the Stella of the ideals understood that for a breathing-space she had secured success—success of dead-sea fruit, success that the other Stella cried out against with all her might. But Stella of the ideals—grim-faced in victory that hurt far more than any defeat—took up the tale.

"Listen, Paul. I know what you mean quite well. You think I ought to get a divorce."

"You couldn't help getting one," said the man savagely.

"I know that, dear, and that makes it all the harder

for me. But I just can't. I mustn't, and God knows I want to . . . now."

"Why mustn't you? Why on earth not? You've every right to happiness—the more right for all you've suffered. I know you want me just as much as I want you—you've told me so and I can feel it. I don't believe in cheap and nasty divorce, but this is different altogether. Stella! say you will?"

And for a moment Stella thought the storm would break again. But Paul had not schooled himself for nothing all his life, and though every nerve was strained tense he had himself in hand again.

"But I *can't*, dear—just can't. I don't believe much—I've had most things knocked out of me with what I've been through, but there are some little bits left still, the ideals that you chaff me about sometimes. You've got them too, you know, dear, really, even if you can't see them now. And that's one of the things that didn't get burnt out in hell—the ideal of marriage as something too fine to destroy, however much the exceptions may try and spoil it. I've always clung to that even at the worst times. And they were bad, Paul, blackness that you couldn't understand."

The little appeal served its turn—all unintended—and the innate chivalry of Paul's real nature came uppermost once more. Yes, it would be cowardly to try to force her to something that her ideals cried out against, to use her love for him to break down those things which made her what she was, the woman that, as he truly said, he worshipped. His brain grew clearer as he fought back the passion that called to him to stop her lips with hot burning kisses, to crush her to him till she must feel that resistance was useless, and the traitorous forces within her should come to his aid.

"I'm so sorry, sweetheart," he said gently. "I hate to think of you suffering as you have. I don't know how you've kept any ideals. I wouldn't have. But I love you the more for it."

"That's reward enough for hell anyway. Your love,

Paul. Something that makes me feel that there is still a God, since there is a man like you in the world. Do you know, once I didn't even believe in Him? That was when I had got past hating Him for what He let me suffer. But even then I clung to my ideals about what marriage ought to be even if mine were not. And I've always felt that divorce just wrecked the whole thing—cut away all the ideal part—turned it into something purely of the earth—earthly. But now that I've learnt to see a little clearer and understood that He is there all the time, that it is He that paints the colours into everything, I feel still more that one must cling to the ideals one has—or just destroy all of oneself that makes life worth while. And now I've had your friendship, and then your love, such gifts as I hadn't thought possible. But I can't give you what you want, myself, because of those ideals."

"Just those ideals that make me love you, Stella mine."

Paul's natural truthfulness spoke out then, despite the strain and the clamour of other more primitive feelings, little concerned with anything save what they could touch and handle and grasp materially.

"But, Paul, I give you all I have to give, all my mind and all my soul, all my heart and all my love. All those are yours for all time if you want them. And tell me you forgive me for not explaining things earlier before I'd made it so hard for you. Tell me you forgive me for hurting you."

"I want all those things, Stella, all the rest of you—mind and heart and soul. I want them all my life. And presently I'll want the rest of you too—I want it now—just the whole of you, Stella, body and mind and soul. But I won't hurry you. I'll wait until you feel you can give me all yourself."

"Then kiss me, Paul; kiss me again before we start back. I think I want your lips more than anything in the whole world."

But as a few minutes later they swung down the long

stone-strewn incline towards the cantonment, now a dim shadow in the mixture of dusk and rising moonlight, Stella Nash, with all the delirious joy of new-found love stabbing at her heart, felt again the old fears sweep over her, the pagan forebodings as she wondered what buffet the gods would deal next. But anyhow now she had gained something that they could never, never take from her again, the love of the one man she wanted, love which she was certain held no shadow of taint, love as clean as the sunlight that he always held so dear.

CHAPTER XI.

MAHSUDLAND.

THE knife-edged hills of Mahsud Waziristan lay gaunt and bare in the translucent light of a November morning, tangles of jagged rock, fringed here and there with little ragged bushes, darker splashes against the sun-burnt yellow of earth and the grey-green of limestone, as Paul Merriman, clad in rough jersey and baggy pantaloons, heavy-nailed chaplis and low-tied pagri, bandolier, and belt, emerged from the dug-down tent that served his regiment for a mess.

Sorarogha camp, jumble of white tent, heaped-up bhoosa bale, packed masses of camels within the long surrounding apron of rusty wire with the sand-bag posts at intervals, spread out before him in the early sunlight. Below the sheer cliff under the stone wall that fringed the mess tent lay the valley of the Takhi Zam, silver threads of swift-running water in a stony bed, coloured here and there with little patches of cultivation, fringed with rows of poplars and willows and an occasional fruit-tree now bare of leaf.

High above the river on either hand against the vivid blue of the cloudless winter sky hung the little stone-walled permanent piquets guarding the road—the unmetalled camel track, whose one extremity lay far southward, where the railway ended at Kaur Bridge, and the other—northward—at Ladha camp, under the ilex-covered hills that look down on the huddled houses of Kaniguram—the Mahsud capital.

The camp was stirring with the beginning of the

day, as string after string of laden mules and camels debouched from the wire to the open space overhanging the Mahsud graveyards, whence the track led downward toward the narrow gorge of the Barari tangi. The tents gave forth little groups of armed and unarmed men : jersey-clad sepoy of Paul's regiment, come up from Quetta the preceding month ; red-fringed sappers and miners leading mules laden with pick and shovel, with coil of barbed wire, or yakhdans of tools ; blue and white-armletted signal personnel—British and Indian alike—getting ready for the day's task of linking up the telephone wires cut by the Mahsud during the night.

Another monotonous day of convoy piquet work in this savage no-man's-land, where the little windowless mud-built towers frown down on the scattered villages, and the only law is that of the rifle and knife. The road to be patrolled for five miles north till Paul's men should link with those working south from the next camp at Piazza ; bush-fringed ravine and jagged-topped hill to be scoured and cleared ere the long chain of camels laden with rations and forage, with ammunition and petrol, with stores of every kind, might start their slow journey up ; the road to be kept clear all day till the unending string of empty beasts worked back to camp again for the night.

And in all probability nothing to see all day, save a distant figure or two on the skyline, a shot or two at long range from the more recalcitrant Mahsuds, who still refused to acquiesce in the presence of this so-called " road " of ours through the heart of their hitherto virgin country—the road which is always the forerunner of law and order, of prosperity, but also of peace. And law and order and peace are anathema to the Pathan, whose ideal of life is the blood-feud, the foray, the raid, whose conception of justice is the personal settlement of lead and steel, whose nature revolts at the very thought of any governance, of any check that might curb in the slightest the innate belief of primitive man

in the individual's right to take and keep what he can with the grey steel, and nowadays with the small-bore bullet.

A naked land of waste spaces, of rugged hills and mountains, of savage men who live in touch with the elemental things of nature, rubbing elbows daily with hunger and thirst, with pain and death, with all those things that, say what you will, are the essentials which prevent men softening and deteriorating into mere seekers of pleasure, soft-bodied, soft-clothed, soft-living travesties of humanity.

A wild land, but one that had always appealed to Paul from the pre-war days, when with his regiment he had first come up to the Indian frontier, and one that still appealed to him even now—the more perhaps since he had begun to learn what real suffering is. A land of elemental action and feeling and thought, and his last month at Quetta had brought him into contact with the most elemental of the complex tangle of feelings that make up a man, the overwhelming desire for the woman he wants above all—and in Paul's case the woman that fate said he could not have.

And here he was now, with life suddenly turned bitter, with hunger such as he had never known gnawing at his heart, the hunger for Stella's voice and her eyes, for the feel of her warm lips on his ; Stella, who clung to her ideals despite the suffering that such adherence must spell for both of them ; Stella, with her eyes on the sunlit valleys at the end of the long straight road, where some day the parallel lines must meet in infinity.

And he in a land where everything spoke of the transience of life, of the shortness of its span, where everything insisted on the importance of making the most of the fleeting moment, of snatching what the gods might offer now, where each day emphasised the futility of waiting for to-morrow, for to-morrow which never comes. A land where a man goes out in the pride of his strength at dawn to lie on the hillside a stark corpse

at noon, and the whining bullet by night wakes the sleeper to find sudden sleep unending.

There were days of greyness and nights of blackness, interspersed with clearer days of sunshine, when Stella's letters would call to him, when some little thing—a tiny wild floweret, the light on a distant hill, the translucent shadows on the rocks—would recall to him those perfect days of friendship, those weeks ere the shadow had fallen, when life was all as fragrant as a Quetta garden in spring. But the grey days and the black nights were taking their toll and doing their work in refining the spirit of this once-careless happy dreamer of dreams.

There was a new gravity about the mouth, a new steadiness in the clear grey eyes, the first shadows of the little fine-etched lines that come from suffering at the corners of the lips under the close-cropped black moustache. There was also a quicker deeper sympathy for others, such as may sometimes be born of suffering in ourselves. And with it all a quickening of that gift of laughter in others' company, laughter lest the world may see us weep. "A cheerful soul" they called Paul Merriman in Sorarogha, but then the speakers did not lie awake with him at night.

But as with his orderly and runner he joined his two companies fallen in at the exit of the camp and stood watching his advanced-guard platoon fan out in the river-bed below him and his leading piquets scrambling up the slopes on either hand, there was the same ready smile about his lips as he chaffed one of his subalterns, the same cheery word for the despondent signal officer coming with him on line inspection. Blackness might sometimes cling around him like a veil, but he had learnt to keep it to himself, to let the world about him picture him as one always in the sunlight.

And the signal officer riding alongside of him as they passed up the river-bed through the tumbled limestone gateway of the Barari tangi wondered to himself how the devil Merriman was always so cheerful. "Good thing to be a bachelor sometimes," reflected the signal

officer. He had just left his wife, newly arrived from home, to come up to this God-forsaken spot. "Suppose his men and this mucky job make up his whole horizon." Which shows that we don't always fully comprehend our neighbour.

Three hours or so of anxiety as one by one his little piquets of a N.C.O. and a handful of men would climb the low underfeatures, spread out over the hilltops, and take up their position for the day, doll-like khaki figures with glinting bayonets, and behind them the laid and loaded Lewis guns, watchful eyes, and ready trigger-fingers nursing each little group into its appointed position, where it would stay all day in the sunshine till the up-and-down convoys had passed on their slow journey, and the lengthening shadows would send them home to camp once more—their parting speeded perhaps by the dropping bullet from the grimy figures that showed sometimes during the day on the more distant skylines. Three hours and more that had no moment to spare even for thought of Stella as mile by mile he made good the road and saw behind him the long line of laden animals pacing slowly up the river-bed.

Then under the shadow of Plume Hill he saw the advancing screen of khaki dots in the white river-bed, the little figures moving on the hills above him, telling him that the Piazza troops had made good their position, and that the road lay open, and he could gather up such of his men as had not been dropped in sixes and nines along the road and settle down for the day.

A few words with the officer in charge of the Piazza piquetting troops, exchange of news, camp gossip, and a little later, as the convoy began to pass, he slid out of the saddle, told his orderly to ungirth and water his pony, and, sitting down in the shade of an ilex above a rippling water-channel hewn out of the limestone rock, filled his pipe, and pulled a letter out of his pocket—a letter that he had read and re-read several times since it had come in the previous day, but one

that he would read and re-read again several times more ere another should replace it.

Stella marked clear in every line of it—handwriting, wording, turn of speech, and thought behind the speech,—and to the man who read it sitting there in the bright winter sunlight above the glinting water, marked even more clearly by the unwritten words that he could glimpse between the lines, the feelings that had prompted the written words, the thoughts he could visualise running on and on long beyond the short sentence which alone showed in black and white on the often folded paper.

Stella all over—vivid description of place and person, turning all suddenly to thought apparently nowise connected, yet somehow linked to the concrete facts that she had penned. News of people and thoughts on life, each and all bearing the impress of the writer. And Paul sitting there could visualise her as she wrote in the setting of Mrs Carlos' bungalow with its perfect taste in furniture and appointment, its bowls of English flowers and sketches of English country, its tasteful, restful colouring of curtain and chair-cover; imagined he could see Stella herself at the writing-table in the corner, morning frock of grey, short of skirt above her dainty ankles, glint of gold slave bangle above her elbow that rested on the table as she wrote or as she sat thinking, pen poised in her slender fingers, grey eyes heavy with thought under the arched lids, ivory of skin against the background of dark mauve hangings.

Then he went on reading :—

“Met Monocloid yesterday. He's still working on the papers, and borrowed my luck-stone again. He thinks he's getting on a bit now, but he won't tell me much. I wonder if there's really anything to find or if the jade really has no meaning—just quaint fantastic carving and chance chosen inscription. But is there anything altogether without a meaning, do you think? I don't, you know. I always think the meaning is there; what we lack sometimes is the vision to see it.

"I've been thinking such a lot since you went away. More and more each week. Trying to get the meaning of things clearly—to understand what they mean for you and me. Wondering, as always, what's behind it all, what is hidden at the back of the obvious. That's very Stella, isn't it? How much simpler it would be if I could just take things as they *look*, face value as it were—take the day for the day and not wonder at all about to-morrow.

"Wonder what I'm doing in your life. Have I come to spoil it for you? Ought I to go out of it? Wonder sometimes if it was a test to see if I could be unselfish enough to put my own feelings out of the way. And then, you know, Paul, I get frightened and wonder what's going to happen to me for being so selfish, for clinging to you when I can give you nothing.

"I don't wonder at all about what you're doing in mine, though, which is illogical—but again Stella. You've come into it to make the dead things wake, to bring the blossoms and the perfume to the dead branches, to colour the waste places with all the joy and life of spring, even though the fruit may never come.

"Do you remember those lines of R. L. Stevenson:—

"If books and my food and summer rain
Beat on my sullen heart in vain,
Lord, thy most pointed pleasure take
And stab my spirit broad awake."

"That's what you've done for me—stabbed my spirit broad awake—clothed all the dead bones in flesh and bidden them walk and move so that always—all my life—they shall never die again, even though it's years and years of the long straight lonely road for me.

"And even though life may hurt more, far more, than all the numbness of death, I'm glad—oh, glad beyond all telling—that it is so, that life—of your giving—has come to me once more, that the real me that was dried and mummied out of recognition has come back to life again."

And to Paul reading, it seemed that the whole letter was redolent of Stella, as if the fine perfume of her presence was there with him in this wilderness of savage rocks, Stella with her perceptions of infinite refinement, her ideals such heights above the dragging materialism of the world around her, her artist's soul seeing through storm and shadow the artist's work about her, clinging with tired hands and weary eyes to what she thought would make life something finer, something grander, even at cost of lifelong suffering to herself.

Very reverent by nature was Paul Merriman, with a fine rare reverence for woman as he idealised her, as he found her in the person of Stella Nash. Gifted with the quick perception that—almost feminine—is the special mark of the best male characters, seeing in woman the other half of man, hampered by function and make in the rougher work of a rough world, yet dowered with courage and capacity for pain beyond that of the bravest man. Very passionate of temperament, yet still with that uncommon hold over himself that even at passion's height could treat with utmost reverence, to Paul woman at all times, and woman in Stella, stood for the finer half of the race, for the major portion of human destiny, source of all the finer feelings and thoughts and deeds that through the long ages, sometimes quicker, sometimes slower, now with painful travail, now with quick upward rush as of wings, have steadily and surely widened and ever widened the gap between man and beast.

Feminine outlook perhaps to some, to many men had he put it all into words. But he did not put things greatly into words; rather did his ideas show forth in actions, in the whole atmosphere that clung about him, that somehow all unwitting made men of cruder clay chary of their speech in his presence.

And yet the men about him looked up to him always, as one who was essentially a man in a world of men, hung on his words in time of stress, sought his counsel when things went wrong, said staccato to one another

with dusty throats in a possibly losing fight: "Lucky, Merriman's running the show—stout fellow, Merriboy—he'll be getting a move on things in a minute, you see!" Which from fighting men is praise indeed.

Half an hour passed as he sat there with unseeing eyes, sucking his pipe, pondering over Stella and her ideals that were costing her and him so much. There were nights when he fought against them, lay wide-eyed and rebellious considering how he could force her; wondering what had held him back that day under Kitchener Hill when so little would have turned the scales and made her take the road that many another would have taken. Divorce hers almost for the asking, and then life for her and him.

But just to-day in the sunshine, in the peace unwonted of a warring land, the rippling music of the little water channel in his ears, the only thing that seemed to matter was that Stella should be always at all points herself, that no desire of his should mar the sunlight in her eyes, that no pressure of his should force her to yield what later she might regret.

Some day perhaps she might come round to his way of thinking, see that divorce if not ideal was at least less ideal-destroying than married misery. Meanwhile he must wait, content himself with the crumbs, play the game to the best of his ability, and in strenuous work in a world where the best part of life was entirely absent—where life meant only two things, keeping one's men and oneself alive and killing as many of the other side as possible—force under those sides of his nature which might play such an ideal part in other circumstances, but which now tore at him at nights like beasts unchained.

And so with the thought of work again in his mind he hailed his orderlies, who were grazing his pony in a little field in the river-bed, and rode back at a foot pace to the deep-cut ravine whence the winding goat-track runs up to Woodlands' piquet; then, dismounting and leaving his pony, climbed the steep slopes up to where—

circle of rusty barbed-wire and rough-built walls of broken stone—Woodland's piquet, with its garrison of twenty men under an Indian officer, guarded the heads of two wide nullahs that would give ample cover to any lurking ambush party of tribesmen.

He entered the wire apron, where on the sunny side of the walls three men were squatting, cooking the midday meal—coarse chupattis and dal. As he came up they jumped to their feet to salute him, tall bobbed-haired Punjabis, clean-limbed and clean-featured. He spoke with them a moment, and the sound of his voice brought the Indian officer out to see who the visitor was.

Then he entered the piquet and spent a few minutes looking round it, talking to the sentries at the loopholes, who, eyes alert for the least movement, stood scanning the country in front; examined the bomb stores, the ammunition, checked the Lewis-gun arrangements, looked into the water receptacles and the reserve ration dumps, which made the piquet self-supporting for five days.

Outside, his two orderlies loosened their belts and sat down for a chat with the garrison, giving camp news to the men cooped up in the piquet night and day for the last fortnight in exchange for bowls of hot-spiced tea; while Paul later, as was his habit, made his midday meal off the tea and chupattis that the men eat, and chatted to them in their own tongue of the little things that make up life—of leave, of prospects of winter rain, of the price of grain in the home villages, of the unsuccessful attack the enemy had made the night before last on Tower piquet down-stream.

Afterwards he talked a while with the Indian officer of the best method of dealing with an attack materialising up the nullahs, should such happen; of the best way to co-operate with the day piqueting troops below if any attempt were made to rush the convoys; noted some needs in the way of extra sandbags and wire; arranged for the relief of a man due for leave.

And so down the hill again in the sunlight and back

up the river-bed to meeting-point as the last of the down convoy passed. Then he watched the troops from Piazza gather in their farthest piquets to begin their homeward journey, and mentally cursed the pioneers for working so late on Plume Hill and so keeping his men out long after the road was closed towards Piazza.

Then finally back towards camp, drawing in his river-bank piquets as he went, little groups of men tumbling down the steep cliffs as fast as they could run over the stones—one does not retire at a walk in tribal country,—saw the last men of the permanent piquets hurry up into their little posts to shut themselves up for the night until the troops from camp should open the road again next day and so let them down to the river for the daily wash. Three hours later, with his companies once again collected, he swung up the long incline into Sorarogha camp with the sun dipping down over the scrub-covered slopes of Bluff Hill, and the camp, a dusty haze of cooking smoke, alive with men and mules and camels settling down after the day's work.

Another day's task done, and no man lost. And, next greatest satisfaction, when after a cup of tea in the mess he entered the tiny tent that his orderly had dug down so that you could stand upright, he found on the packing-case which served him for table a letter in grey envelope with the Quetta postmark, a letter addressed in Stella's clear handwriting, seven closely-written pages—both sides—that made him forget the tiny tent and the gaunt hills, the bubbling camels and the dusty camp, the fast-veiling misty river-bed, and the little twinkling signal lights of the hilltop piquets up and down-stream; made him oblivious even of the desultory rifle-shots that for half an hour or so echoed up the river valley from somewhere down-stream, where a Gurkha battalion's piquet was arguing with certain Mahsuds who resented their presence, which dominated a track used from time immemorial by parties of raiders bound upon their unlawful occasions

towards the plains in search of loot, camels and sheep, silver and grain, women and children to hold for ransom, or throats to be slit from sheer *joie de vivre*.

A letter that, like many before and after it, lay by his bedside all night as an amulet when the blackness of thought came down, and the days and weeks and months ahead loomed up unending before him, and the whole of him clamoured but for one thing—Stella's arms about him ; and ideals became first ghostly things of no value, and then crushing fetters to be broken somehow or other, be the ultimate cost what it might.

CHAPTER XII.

QILA SHIKAN.

THE stillness of the hot Indian noon lay brooding over Taragurh on an early November day, and the jungles from which the fortress rose lay bathed in shimmering heat haze. Far to westward above the trees swelled the blue mistiness of the distant hills, and northward—little silver streaks and chains of pools—ran the Tana River winding away into the thickness of the jungles. High in the air above the hill, on which lay the shattered stone ramparts and the heaped ruins of the old palace fortress, circled the watching white vultures and the wheeling kites, poised with motionless wings in the cloudless blue vault of the sky.

Jack Taylor sat in the shade of an old banyan-tree near the walls studying some closely-written pages and neat diagrams—the fruits of many nights' labours and of many painstaking days of work with level and compass, seeking ever the hidden passage referred to in the old record, whose full meaning he had at last mastered.

Beside him on a flat rock lay two pieces of jade—the one which he had taken from Vivian Carter's neck nearly four years before, and a new one which some weeks earlier he had recovered from the cave temples, where, as he had learnt from Pierre Rivecourt's writings, it had been hidden by the old Brahman minister the day before the fort fell.

A small brown lizard lay questingly upon the rock watching with curious eyes the human who sat there wakeful at a time when the rest of the world save the

birds above seemed sunk in sleep. Its tiny beady eyes watched intently for any movement, the raised head motionless. Taylor rustled the papers, and the noise sent the little animal darting back with snake-like wriggle of thin tail into the crevice whence it had emerged. The sudden movement caught the man's eye, and, following it, his gaze fell upon the two bits of jade laid together near the prismatic compass with which he had been working.

As he laid down the papers to feel for his cigarette-case, his thought went back to the day when after a night's unbroken sitting at the manuscript he had set forth to the old temples just after dawn with the secret of the jade fragment's hiding-place at last clear before him. Some distance from him now he could see the dark entrances of the temples, and as he looked he pictured to himself that sunlit morning when he had penetrated again into their bat-haunted gloom, carrying with him a small pickaxe.

There had been, however, but little need for any tool, since even now, after nearly a century and a half, the sliding stone under the base of the great image which was mentioned in the record had turned as smoothly as on the night when Gopal Tiwari had made his way down through the darkness—with fear of capture upon him, and presentiment of coming torture and death heavy at his soul—to hide in the keeping of his gods the piece of carved green stone which might some day reveal to his master's heir the secret of the wealth which should be his.

And there in the little recess—only a few inches square—surrounded by the faded débris of what had once been sweet-smelling blossoms, Taylor had found the fragment of jade which Nawab Badulla had given to this man of alien religion—to the priest of a despised faith—to the servant he trusted before all.

Just such another piece of green stone as Taylor had carried about with him ever since that night at Kissi-mané camp—defaced Nagri inscriptions—inchoate pat-

tern of wavy lines—and the clear-cut inscription in flowing Arabic letters.

Persian words again, but of different meaning, since Taylor had painfully deciphered them—though his knowledge of Persian was only the little that every student of Urdu inevitably picks up in time.

“Qila Shikan”—“The fortress breaker.”

To his first feelings of delight at finding the stone after the lapse of a hundred odd years had succeeded the revulsion of disappointment at not getting some clearer clue. The words seemed meaningless, and there was no mention of them in Pierre Rivecourt's record.

But following up the fact that the first piece was engraved with the name of a very definite landmark in the old fort, Taylor set to work to try and discover some other point which might be that engraved on the fragment he had found concealed in the temples.

Week had followed fruitless week, and it was perhaps more by accident than by design that only a few days ago, pottering about among the ruins, he had come upon a dismantled gun, half hidden by the tumbled blocks of stone which had once formed its embrasure. Ten feet of dirty bronze with quaint loops of bronze at the centre, and a lion's head in bronze at the back behind the touch-hole, half buried in the dusty earth, there it lay as it had lain for years since it had been torn from its rough mounting.

But there was scroll work upon it, half obliterated by time and weather and choked with dust turned to caked mud as rainy season succeeded rainy season. And when at the cost of an afternoon's hard toil Taylor had finally cleared it sufficiently to study the rough pattern, there upon it stood out clear those same words that he had found upon the second piece of jade: “Qila Shikan”—“destroyer of forts.” Proud title for the long gun that Badulla's father had cast as sign of his power, and mounted on the walls on the opposite side of the fort, from where the great arch of the Khuni Darwaza stood clear against the blue of the sky above

the narrow winding path leading down the hill through the ruined grass-grown buildings that fringed the Toka road, ere it wound away into the surrounding jungle.

Taylor was not one of those to whom the past appeals, save only when it shows some definite connection with the present, which may be turned to personal profit. But to Paul Merriman, for instance, or to Stella, the gun and the inscription would have called up a host of dream pictures ; have brought to them visions of Badulla's father in brocade and silk, standing among his courtiers, as the wizened old master metal-worker released the fuming glowing metal to run into the long mould ; have snatched from the past some little glimpse of the gleaming gun being swung into its place above the walls, then frowning unbroken line of block upon block of red stone ; have seen perhaps the engraver at work upon the title of pride ; visualised the Nawab laying the smoking linstock to the breech to fire the first shot from the new piece ; heard the shrill buzz of conversation behind the silken-curtained awning, where the women were assembled in discreet seclusion to see the wondrous gun—biggest ever known in its age and place—vanish in the cloud of dense white smoke, as with dull sullen roar it flung its rounded stone ball out across the deep ravine that fringed the hill of Tara-gurh, and the Nawab showered royal thanks and regal gifts upon its maker.

But Taylor had no such power and no wish for any such power of imagination. Amply sufficed the fact that he had unearthed a mouldering piece of metal work which bore upon it the same words as adorned Gopal Tiwari's long-hidden piece of jade. For him the sole interest in the gun was to find the connection between it and the Gate of Slaughter on the opposite side of the fort.

And it was upon this that he was engaged, sitting there to-day in the hot noonday sunshine, trying to piece together the clues afforded by the fragments of the jade.

Four pieces there had been, each given to a different man. Of that he was sure from the old record. And upon two of them he now knew were engraved the names of certain definite landmarks. On the face of it, quite obviously, the two points referred to were intended to give by intersection either the locality where the treasure had been hidden or else the entrance to the passage which Rivecourt mentioned. And therefore in all probability the other two fragments would show two more points.

Passages a many there must be in this old fort, honey-combed as it was with crumbled dungeon and underground storhouse. Some Taylor had already located in his wanderings around the ruins, which extended over most of the hill. Natural caves also, such as those of the temples, and what simpler than to connect up a series of such passages artificially made. Exploring them was lonely work and dangerous, for the brickwork was far from secure ; in some cases indeed the passages had ended suddenly in heaped piles of fallen stone, hiding whatever lay beyond. And more than once, penetrating into the gloom with his electric-torch, the angry hiss of disturbed snakes had caused Taylor to start back suddenly.

What had happened to the other pieces of jade, he wondered ? The piece which was given to Mahmud Hussein ? What means could he find to trace it even if it still existed ? And what of the fragment that, as Pierre Rivecourt noted, the Nawab had worn as an amulet ? Probably taken from his body after his death, and now perhaps lost ; perhaps passed down as an heirloom in some forgotten Mahratta hamlet.

To search for them would be a quest beside which the proverbial needle hunt in a haystack would be child's play. No ; he must do his best with the two bits that fortune had placed in his hands. Convinced that the landmarks they indicated were in some way guiding points from which to commence, the question still remained as to how they were to be utilised.

Four definite points might be the corners of a square, of which the centre gave the position of the sought-for treasure. On the other hand, they might not, but it was worth trying. But then again which corners did the two features he knew of indicate ? Adjacent corners ? Opposite corners ? And could he be sure that the old gun was still in the same place as it was when the fort was taken ? It might have, indeed probably had, been used for years afterwards, and its position changed perhaps half a dozen times. Still, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, the only thing was to assume that it lay to-day close to the site it had occupied during the siege.

He had commenced by taking the Khuni Darwaza and the old gun as adjacent corners of a square, but since by doing so the view of any other possible corners was entirely blocked out, and further, the side of the square lay in parts outside the walls ; he concluded that a more promising solution was to treat them as opposite corners. The line joining the two points—some five hundred yards apart—ran over a dozen ruined buildings, any or all of which might have something to do with the matter.

Then he had looked for other conspicuous points which might perhaps be those originally indicated—if his theory was right—by the missing jade fragments. One he had chosen almost at once as being a most suitable mark, since it was visible from practically everywhere in the fort.

The first Nawab's Tower of Victory still stood almost untouched by the passing years, save for a few places where cannon-shot had smashed away the rich carvings. Vivid sunlit stonework, it tapered into the blue sky, soaring up above the mosque at its foot, fluted stone sides and little fretted balconies around the narrow arched windows that slitted its wall at every storey ; long carven scroll inscriptions, verses from the Koran, and stanzas relative to the deeds of those who erected it, twining lines of inlaid tile work, turquoise and

green against the white of marble and the red of sandstone.

It stands there in striking contrast to the dark rock-carved temples below, marking, it seems, the difference between Islam—religion of the glaring desert spaces under the cloudless sun-bathed sky—and Hinduism—faith of the gloomy temples, the little guttering oil-lamps, the overpowering scents of tropic flowers, and the rustle of silks of temple dancing girls. It stands there accentuating the gulf between the two conceptions, Islam showing man alone in the open naked sunlight before his Maker, and Hinduism picturing man as bound to a hundred material interests, and hedged at every turn by call of sex, of primitive instincts, of the earth, earthy.

Both in fact figuring overstrained emphasis of different truths, only the combined realisation of which can give any guide to humanity's real position, midway between the material and the ethereal, bound to both one and the other, made to satisfy the legitimate demands of each.

But whereas the temples lie hidden in the heart of the hill, their entrance huddled among the ruins of what were once human habitations, the Tower of Victory soars alone in splendid isolation, hanging sheer against the sunlit sky above the cliff side, a shaft of golden sunlight by day, a pillar of misty ivory in the tranquil moonlight, the first thing to catch your eye as you approach Taragurh, the last glimpse to be seen as the winding jungle track between the dense bamboos veils it finally from your vision.

And not unnaturally Taylor had seized upon it as the most striking landmark in the place, feeling convinced that had he had to choose some bearing-point for any purpose he would have selected that one first of all.

Moreover, it lay at a suitable distance from both the Khuni Darwaza and the gun, at an angle from each. Meticulously he had plotted the joining lines on

the map, which even now was pinned on to the little sketchboard that lay at his feet. As a screen to his real purpose he worked daily at water-colour pictures of the fort, for he was a neat draughtsman with an eye for colour, and his sketches, if not exactly up to academy standard, had always a certain value.

The resultant diagram was very nearly the diagonal half of a square—a fact which strengthened his belief that the tower was one of the landmarks, and that somewhere on the opposite side was the fourth point, the location of which would give him the key to the whole puzzle.

But try as he would he was unable to find any mark there which carried conviction. All along what would be the fourth side of the square lay the tumbled mass of marble-faced sandstone which had once been the palace—domed summer-houses, fish-backed gateways, crenellated bastions, little umbrella-shaped pavilions, some standing, some in ruins, over blank walls that enclosed rabbit warrens of small silent rooms and passages once all alive with swift feminine chatter, with rustle of silk and brocade, with patterings of heelless slippers, with coming and going of slave girls, marked with all the mixture of scented luxury and primitive squalor that stamped—and still stamps—the residences of secluded women.

But nowhere in it all stood out any salient feature that might be seized upon as the missing point, the key to the problem whose quick solution became every day of more and more importance to Taylor, whose funds, never inexhaustible, were beginning to lessen remarkably fast, even living as he did in conditions where expenses were at their minimum. Several months already had elapsed since he had started on his quest, and there was little to show for it.

And continually there haunted him the fear that some prying person might visit Taragurh and hinder him in his work—might wonder what was the attraction that held him there month after month just making mediocre water-colour sketches of the ruins.

So far he had seen but two white men since his arrival—a wandering forest officer, who had spent the night there when touring his district, and a subaltern on leave after tiger. The latter had spent nearly a fortnight in the vicinity of the fort, and hampered Taylor considerably; he was forced to paint hard all the time to justify himself, and the compass and the level had had to be kept out of sight.

To-day he had come once more to try and locate some spot among the tumbled ruins of the palace which might give him some line to work upon, and as the shadows began to lengthen ever so slightly as the sun commenced its westward journey, he gathered up his papers, and, clambering over the broken wall, crossed over to the far side of the fort.

For three hours he wandered about the crumbling buildings, but never once did he remark any point which seemed to bear any definite connection with the great tower opposite. He took bearings from arched windows, from matchlock slits, from little pavilions; not one of them gave any more definite promise than any other. The green parrots and the rock-pigeons swept past, the circling vultures and the brown-winged kites hovered over him—wondering doubtless what the solitary figure was doing in the sleeping landscape—the little lizards scuttled into their holes as he approached. He seemed to them out of place, as indeed he was—a solitary figure in a world where he had no right, a world that had long ago been handed over to the relics of past grandeur and of fame now utterly forgotten.

Finally, in despair he decided on a landmark which, though of no great noteworthiness, seemed to him to fulfil more or less the conditions he had suggested to himself that the fourth point should fulfil. It was a little window that gave out from an octagonal room, whose walls were lined with carved marble, delicate tracery of branch and leaf, the fineness of the carving visible even now, though the veined stone was stained and cracked in places. The floor was of tessellated

marble slabs, and the whole look of the room implied that it had been the resort of a person of some distinction. At one period the window had been filled with a pierced marble screen, delicate as lace-work, but this had been broken away, and now only the jagged ends projected from the side frames.

He set down its exact position on the sketch he carried, and then plotted the intersection of the lines from the four points on the ground. Then he left the palace, and once more the cooing doves invaded the little marble room whence his appearance had banished them, and filled the close air with the soft music of their monotonous song.

The exact point where the lines met was an open space with ruined buildings on either hand. It was covered now with coarse spear grass, but from the half-buried fragments of stonework that showed here and there it had probably at some remote time been a walled garden. Thirty yards away were the remains of a domed pavilion, with fretted stone walls, carved stonework again, though now weathered by many rains, and with the red sandstone pillars smoothed and defaced by the hot weather winds and dust-storms.

He cut a branch from a little tree near by, and drove the sharpened picket he fashioned from it into the ground to mark the place which his compass bearings from the four points gave him.

Then, lighting a cigarette, he followed the almost obliterated track that led out through the breach in the walls to the little plateau below where his camp was pitched. There were two more hours of daylight yet, and he had no desire to do the next piece of work in full view of any one who might come there. Not that any one ever did come into the fort as a rule, save an occasional wandering goatherd from the little village that lay on the river two miles away, a prowling forest guard from time to time, and the infrequent European visitor like the subaltern already mentioned. Still, it was as well to be careful.

As he sat out after dinner watching the moon rise beyond the Tower of Victory, he wondered what the night would bring forth. Would it be once again disappointment, or would he this time find that at long last he had got the key, find the pickhead breaking into the blackness of the forgotten passage, the passage where Pierre Rivecourt and his companions stumbled blindfolded ere they reached the hidden treasure-house?

Then as the silence in the servants' tent told him that they had settled down for the night, he gathered up the tools and the electric-torch, the haversack and the thermos-flask from his tent, and set out once more up the hillside and over the walls into the enclosure, where the now vivid moonlight glistened on white stone and threw long black shadows from dome and crumbling house across the grass-grown courts.

Setting down his load by the peg he had driven in in the afternoon, he took up the pick and commenced to break into the hard soil. He laboured for an hour and more, and then it seemed to him that the ground rang hollow under his blows. There was sweat on his forehead now—not only of manual labour but of excitement,—and as he stopped an instant his hands were trembling.

An owl hooted from the domed building near by, but Taylor heeded it not as he swung up the pick again. A few minutes later and no further doubt remained, for his last blows revealed unmistakeable stonework at the bottom of the pit he had excavated, while half an hour later there showed in the full light of the moon a couple of square feet of small stone blocks carefully fitted, whose rounded shape was unquestionable evidence that they covered some passage or aqueduct.

But the masonry was too solid for his pick to make any impression upon, and after some vain attempts he contented himself with enlarging somewhat the hole he had made. Then as the night was drawing on he rigged up a rough camouflage over the excavation, scattered the dug-out earth, and, picking up his tools, went back to his camp. What a fool he had been not to

think of bringing a crowbar ! But still it was perhaps as well. He would not have had much time to do any more, and now he could start fair the following night.

As he cast himself down upon his camp-bed, visions of wealth swept across his mind, and with them the concomitant thoughts of what he would do once he had secured it. He had had enough of this kind of life ; solitude, either in the jungle or elsewhere, and hard thankless work had no attraction for Taylor. And he fell asleep visualising pictures of the fleshpots of civilisation—of the pleasures many and varied, and more than alluring, that lay open to him who held the golden key. His estimation of his fellow-beings was not emphasised by any erring on the side of over-valuation. Undoubtedly every man—and woman—had a price, and if you were prepared to pay enough he—or she—was yours. And on that he fell asleep.

CHAPTER XIII.

SHADOWS.

"OLD Musa and his bally cut-throats are going on the rampage again, Merriboy, so you'd better tell your lads to keep their eyes skinned. He's believed to be keen on mopping up a piquet, as his folk are tired of being bombed from 'planes and shelled by long-range hows. without having a smack back. Dunno yet where he'll chip in, but our intelligence bird seems to think it will be somewhere south of Piazza."

The Staff Officer, very neat in bright-buttoned khaki and armlet, well-polished belt, and long boots, was tightening up the girths of his saddle as he spoke. Paul, standing beside him in the river-bed, was clothed as usual in Mahsudland war-dress of jersey and baggy pantaloons, with the accompanying fitments of sepoy trappings.

"He's welcome to have a dig, Blair. I don't fancy he'll get much change out of our coves anyway. They're generally pretty wide-awake," he replied.

"I know, but still I thought I'd tell you. You'll get it on paper later as soon as 'Intelligence' gets his report out. He got it from some ex-sepoy who wants to keep in with us, as his land lies under our piquets."

The armletted one swung himself into the saddle and gathered up his reins. "Well, so long. I must be getting off. My old man is expecting me back before lunch, as he wants to gad round and see the new camp

piquets afterwards. Cheerio!" He trotted off upstream along the well-beaten track made by the daily convoys passing up and down.

Paul watched him go, and then, with his orderly behind him and his syce leading "Dawn Mist," retraced his steps towards where in the little fields around the foot of Barrier Hill his reserve platoons were settled for the day, the mules grazing off the remnants of such crops as they could find, the men eating what food they had brought in their haversacks, or dozing in the sunshine.

Well, if Musa Khan—leader of the most pugnacious sub-section of a pugnacious tribe—chose to turn out his braves to try and abolish a piquet or two he was welcome. Life had been quiet enough these late weeks ever since the regiment had come up, and even a fight would be a not unpleasant change to the monotony of the daily round. Not that Paul liked fighting for fighting's sake. He had sufficient imagination to see the seamy side of it all—enough vision to realise what a casualty or so might spell to people hundreds of miles away. His job was to see by unsleeping vigilance that casualties did not occur in this semi-peace, semi-war, utterly topsy-turvy kind of life that he and his like were forced to lead.

But all the same a little enemy activity would give one an opportunity of not thinking for a time—at least of only thinking of matter-of-fact things like attacks and counter-attacks, strengthening piquet defences, re-considering road-protection measures. And of late he had thought more than enough about the other things of life, the things which had come to matter so much that they eclipsed all the rest of his horizon.

Black night and grey day had succeeded black night and grey day as the desire for Stella grew stronger and stronger in this land of primitive feelings, in this land where the ever proximity of death made one clamour the more insistently for the utter fulness of life, where

the ever presence of the cold steel made one hunger the more for the warm kiss, where nature was at her strongest, and the constant awakening of the primæval passions of battle aroused inevitably the equally primæval call that bids man replace himself ere he die, though nature, subtle in all her processes, veils for the man the meaning of the call under the radiance of sheer desire.

What had ideals to do with life of this type? What were ideals save meaningless empty symbols, coined in a world altogether other, pleasant sounding and fine seeming, but utterly void and foolish when you looked at them in the naked glare of life as Nature knows it, of life as it is when you cut away the frills and get down to basic facts?

What was the good of bartering all that made life sweet in exchange for an empty vision of a world that might be better some day for your little action? The world would go on just the same after he and Stella were dead and gone as it had gone on for untold æons ere he and she had ever entered it.

And to Paul in his present black mood it seemed that the only lasting things in the world about him were the gaunt limestone hills, the elemental forces of life and death, the knife and naked rock, and—to render them bearable for the short space that man lives between darkness of dawn and darkness of night—love. And Stella was deliberately throwing away with both hands the precious days that were so few, the years that could be only so short at best, for the sake of a dream intangible.

No longer could his great-uncle say that Paul did not know what he wanted. The whole of him had become one concentrated want, focussed on Stella. He wanted her companionship, he wanted her mind, her soul, and most of all at present he wanted the bodily Stella with her grey eyes, her faultlessly cut lips, the long curve of her throat, the whole of her slim self.

What a fool he had been to listen to her, he told himself, to consider her ideals, when as he knew for a certainty so very little pressure would have served to make her let them go never to return. He must write more strongly, but what letter could ever have half the force of the spoken word, what letter could serve him half so well as to talk to her with his arms about her under those blue-shadowed hills that they had both come to love so much? And now he had given her time to let her ideas crystallise more, when if only he had forced her at first they would never have reappeared. Stella would never take back what she had once given, never. If only he had made her promise to take the necessary legal steps for her freedom she would not have looked back again.

What maggot had got into her brain that made her talk of spoiling the ideal side of marriage? What could do it one tithe of the damage that her life with her husband had done? What sense was there in this abstract talk of unrealisable ideals when the real ideal lay within her grasp? Happiness untold for her and him if she would but choose to take it. And take it she must. He must make her take it, both for her sake and his. He must reason with her, show her the emptiness—the real emptiness—of the ideas she had got hold of, compare it to the fulness of life that opened before them if she would but agree.

He sat there biting the stem of his pipe, his tumultuous thoughts surging hither and thither, aftermath of a long sleepless night rendered the more bitter by the failure of the mails to come up the line and the consequent non-receipt of her expected letter.

Divorce? Why, damn it! It was the obvious logical business to cure certain evils. Did she think that she and he—creatures of live flesh and blood—were to go through life without fulfilment merely because a beast who ought never to have come within a hundred miles of her continued somewhere or other to spoil the clean

air by his very breath? Was their love to remain empty of fruit, a lifeless thing, until they became too old to love at all, and the flying years should take from them the sweets of life ere they had even tasted them? What was she thinking of, and what did she think *he* was made of if she imagined that he would go through life alone after he had learnt to love her?

Some men wake early to the call of sex, some late, some few never at all. Paul had woken a little later than many, and the awakening was the stronger for the fact. But now every nerve in him clamoured for that fulness of life which in a world based on duality of sex is only possible to the perfect combination of man and woman. He understood now what was the inner meaning of those half-felt, ill-comprehended longings that from time to time had swept over him in the past, the longings for something more, something better, the feelings of incompleteness, of solitude even among his fellows; feelings and longings only part realised and hardly understood at the time, submerged again almost at once by the myriad activities of a man living a man's life among men, submerged again almost before their presence was even realised—long before they had had time to explain themselves.

But now he had grasped fully what he had been seeking dimly all these years, sought without knowing. He had indeed now embarked on the quest that he had not even thought of beginning—the search for the some one who should complete life, the companion soul, the kindred mind, the some one who for a man can be none but a woman and for a woman none but a man.

And underneath all these finer desires now clamoured ever—intensified more and more by the life primitive led in a primitive country—the insistent call of the man for his mate, for the woman who had come to be all women to him, the call that ringing down the ages keeps the ages ever new, the call which, though those who utter it in silence know it not, is as much a promise for

the future as was Noah's rainbow, the call which when it hushes and dies in individual or family or race spells extinction, nothing less.

And Paul was alive, intensely alive, and the life in him clamoured for continuance, albeit though since most of the roots of life are veiled from uncomprehending eyes, its clamour reached him only as intense desire for the companionship of one woman, for the sound of her voice, for the touch of her lips, for the feel of her hand in his as they went down the road of life together. As a man he could not see beyond that, that filled all his vision, for man lives mostly in the present or the proximate future in these matters, whereas woman largely sees farther in this one respect, though otherwise perhaps more limited in outlook.

Stella, on the other hand, sitting in the Quetta sunshine that same late November day, half dreaming with her writing-pad on her knee, felt all these same desires, craved for Paul's companionship, for the comfort of his presence, for the sight of him sitting there close to her with his well-worn shooting-coat and shorts, his beloved pipe in his clean-cut mouth, craved also for the strength of his arms about her. But whereas to Paul all that and all which that stood for was an end in itself, to Stella it was only the beginning and accompaniment of more.

Stella likewise was intensely alive, and, being a woman, her thoughts wandered unbidden much further; her simpler desires were far more complex, since they did not visualise life as just Paul and her—Paul and her and then others to come in the fulness of time,—that was what life should consist of. And as she sat there in the sunshine, thought uncommanded surging through her mind, something plucked at her heart, the call of motherhood, the cry of the children she had not yet borne, demanding life of her and of another.

And as Stella of the ideals came back to the present and took charge of her thoughts once more, forcing

them unwilling from channels they were loath to leave, she wondered once again whether some ideals were worth clinging to, whether they ought in fact to be clung to, since she was denying not only herself and Paul but perhaps others too, others whose claim lay at the very root of her being.

Then she marshalled her thoughts again—in what part of her said was their proper strain—and took up her pen once more to continue her letter to Paul—Paul now sucking an unlit pipe, alone with the blackness of his thoughts in the vivid sunlight under Barrier Hill, Woodland's piquet clear-cut against the cloudless sky to his front.

And if Paul had been there in Quetta just then—even though despite his quick perceptions he would never have fathomed *those* thoughts behind the grey shadows of her eyes—he might have found it easier to sway her, to make her realise the utter emptiness of the ideals she spoke of.

But he wasn't—he was in Mahsudland, with accompaniment of Lewis-gun mule and piquetting troops, watching the slow camels plodding down the glaring white river-bed, seeing with unseeing eyes a signal party patching cable, a group of men washing in the stream, a ration party trudging home with their now unladen mules, and wrestling with his jumbled thoughts in the cool stillness of the sunlit afternoon, with the ripple of fast-running water in his ears.

A step beside him brought him back to actuality as his subaltern—Smithers of the boyish face—planted himself on a bank of earth opposite and lit a cigarette produced from a packet of "Scissors" out of his haversack. His pagri was rather disarrayed, and he cast it off to let the breeze play on his forehead, for he had run down most of the way from the piquets on top of Barrier many hundred feet above, which Paul had sent him to inspect.

"Any news, Major?" he queried. "That was Major

Blair, wasn't it? Spotted you through the signaller's telescope."

"They seem to think that the Abdullai are going to try and scupper a piquet soon. Nothing else."

"Hope they have a shot," replied Smithers joyfully. The lad was young and brimful of keenness, and so far Mahsudland had produced none of those thrills which it had promised when Smithers, all athirst for war and glory, had come up to the frontier for the first time in his young life two months before. "They won't get anything out of Barrier anyway—old Murtaza has everything tophole. Nor out of any other piquet of ours," he continued, with that pride in his regiment and his men which is the caste mark of the good class subaltern.

"They won't try Barrier," said Paul. "It's much too strong, and there's no particular cover for an attack. It's the other side I don't like overmuch. There's too many nullahs about Gibraltar and Woodland's for my taste. Nothing to prevent quite a large-size lashkar lying up there in all that scrub out beyond the piquets."

"Woodland's is rather a beast of a place," admitted Smithers, "and Garhwali's worse. But what can we do? The farther out you go from the river the worse it gets. I was over that ground yesterday."

"I know. I've warned both piquets several times. Luckily the Indian officers are good, and I don't think either are likely to get caught out. But I'm going to get Woodland's wire thickened up a bit. They can do with it. You can do that job to-morrow, because we've got to piquet again owing to the Gurkha relief. Sorry they're going."

The Gurkha battalion at Sorarogha was moving down the next day India-bound, their place being taken by a somewhat young battalion coming up the line. Rather an attractive bait for the Mahsuds that would be, thought Paul, for new battalions always got worried until they learnt the ropes.

"I'm glad Diwan Ali's come back," said Smithers, looking across to a little group of men, the centre figure of which was a rather fair-faced Punjabi Mussalman Naik, short-bobbed black hair, and clear-cut features, hazel eyes under straight eyebrows above slightly aquiline nose and clean-curved nostrils. "He's lucky getting off so lightly after taking one slap through the tummy."

The man in question had been hit by a sniper's chance bullet the second day the regiment had come up the line, nearly two months before, and when he had gone down to the base—a limp form on a stretcher—Paul had lamented at probably having seen the last of one of his most promising N.C.O.'s. But clean living and an athletic life had pulled him through where a softer man would have been crocked for months, and Diwan Ali, returning three days previously, had swung up the incline into Sorarogha camp as jaunty and debonnair as ever, tall, straight, clean-limbed, picture of a hereditary fighting man of the best, such as the fighting races of India can produce.

"Yes. I didn't expect to see him back again," replied Paul, looking across at the man sitting there in the sunshine laughing over some jest of his fellows. "I wonder what his people used to be? There's damned good breeding in him from somewhere, although he's not overblessed with land, and what he has is poorish. I stopped in his village last time I was recruiting just before the war. He was only a child of thirteen then, but handsome as they make 'em. I marked him down then as a likely lad, and sure enough in '17 he blew in at the depôt. Great thing breeding in the East still; you can see it in the way he handles men and in the way his section follow him. He's a throwback of sorts, I think; probably a hundred or two years ago his people were on the top of the wave. One never knows of course, but undoubtedly his blood is something more than ordinary peasant stock. His grandfather was serving in the Mutiny, and became an I.O. later on. That's

about all I was able to find out about him. But he'll be an I.O. in time, for he's well-educated in his way."

"Touch of Pathan blood in him, don't you think, Major? He's extraordinarily fair even for a Punjabi."

"Maybe. You can never tell. Or perhaps his mother was a hillwoman of sorts. The Pathan theory is more likely though, for there's dashes of that blood all across Northern India. Anyway, he's as good a type as we've got, and I wish we could find some more like him. Thank goodness there's the last of the camels and there's no working-parties out to-day, so we can push home now. Get your people together, and I'll ride up and tell Andrews to start pulling in his piquets."

Andrews, who temporarily commanded the other company, was up-stream a mile and a half or so farther on. Paul mounted and rode up-stream till he found him, his mules loaded up and his men fallen in waiting orders to withdraw.

They got back to camp earlier than usual that day, for which Paul was thankful, since he had letters to write, and he preferred doing that by daylight rather than sitting up after dinner. Three nights' broken rest left him somewhat weary, and he hoped for sleep that night. And then the mail had at last come up with letters for him—letters from Stella, two days overdue; also one in Monocloid's rather scrawly handwriting, telling of the progress he had made with the papers borrowed from Mrs Carter, and of his discovery that Taragurh contained a Tower of Victory.

"Some use in Babu products after all. Going to tackle the papers seriously now. I'll bet there's something in the second part. I'm going down there at Christmas. Carlos is going that way for a shoot. If you get a spot of leave, blow along too, and bring a bag for the boodle. Mrs Nash is getting quite excited about it. I told her something of the record, and she thinks with me that it smells Stevensony."

But that letter could keep for the moment, although he had opened it before the others. They were always kept to the last.

And as he sat reading them, the hunger for their writer grew strong again, the longing to see her, to be able to talk to her instead of trying to condense thoughts into black-and-white on cold unresponsive paper—black-and-white that may look so different a few hundred miles away, raise doubts, uncertainties, misunderstandings, give such false impressions, such travesties of the real meaning.

What would he not give just then for a few hours' talk with Stella, put everything to her clearly, explain the blackness that swept over him, ask her to look ahead and consider again whether it was worth it all, whether she was prepared to sacrifice herself and him just for a few empty ideals, condemn him to go on suffering when she could make life heaven—nothing less—if only she chose?

Could that be real love, that took no heed of what he was going through, that counted not life as it is here, that lacked understanding of all that makes up a man, of the intense desire that a man like him knows when at last he finds the woman he really wants? And little doubts began to flicker in his mind, red torches in black caverns, little torches that flung crooked shadows and altered shapes and values out of all recognition.

Did she really think that mere friendship could suffice for him, that he was prepared to go on year after year like this, hungering for her always? Was not she prepared to sacrifice something for him, give up some little of her ideas for him who would give up all he had for her? It was unfair, it was selfish, it was cruel. No one had any right to ask such a thing, least of all the woman who had said she loved him. He recalled her words. Perhaps they weren't all true. Perhaps they didn't mean what they had seemed to then under the shadow of Kitchener Hill.

And the little torches grew redder, threw even more crooked shadows in the darkness that blotted out the sunlight which he always associated with Stella. These last weeks of longing and suffering had shadowed his mind a lot and darkened his normally clear vision, so that now sometimes the things he had believed so clear, so sharp and vivid, Stella's love, Stella's thoughts, were veiled and grey and formless, misty shadows in a grey haze, thing of uncertain shape and form, not what they had seemed so long.

"She doesn't really love you—she's thinking of herself all the time," whispered the little faint voices behind the torches—voices that sometimes now grew quite loud and insistent and plausible. "If she *really* did she wouldn't wait a minute. Do you think a woman who really loved a man would start talking tosh about ideals? No; she likes you—you're handy and convenient and useful sometimes when she's feeling lonely, but that's not love. Love is just giving—giving all, everything without reserve,—just doing *everything* to make the person you love really happy—just what you'd do. You wouldn't worry about silly ideals and let them stand between her and happiness, would you? Right and wrong, that's a different question. Of course, one wouldn't do anything really wrong. But that doesn't apply here. This is one of the things that has to be treated on its own merits. What's wrong for one person is often right for another. She just wants friendship—empty friendship. What's the good of that to any man of flesh and blood, or to any woman either, if she really loves you?"

Very, very logical and plausible voices, full of common-sense and incontestable facts, to the man who with mind and body under continual strain had to listen to them, to lie awake with them in the darkness, to wake to them in the morning after they had talked subconsciously to his mind all night.

And at the moment he felt he almost hated Stella,

hated her for what she was prepared to make him suffer, hated her while all his body and soul cried out for her, when he longed for her more than anything else in the world. Hated her and desired her passionately all at one and the same time, and wondered for his sanity in so doing.

CHAPTER XIV.

A DISTANT STAR.

MONOCLOID'S Overland purred up the steep incline to the pass on the Mastung road, all the hills around clear and sharp in the cold crisp air of a December afternoon. Behind, the Quetta plain, clear of dust for once in a way, lay spread out like a map, the first snow white on the long ridge of Zarghun and on the twin horns of Takatu.

The grey Dasht-i-be-daulat, crossed by the thin white ribbon of the road to India and the spidery metal line of the Nushki railway, whose terminus lies on the Persian border, seemed more than usually to justify its name—"the plain of poverty," bare poor soil, glittering everywhere with the white saltpetre splashes that mark the karezes—the lines of connected wells which form the water-system for the rainless tract of Baluchistan—and at infinite spaces little mud-built villages, and walled gardens of dusty leafless trees.

Carlos and Monocloid were in front, and behind them Stella and Marjorie Carlos wrapped in furs—their feet on the tea-basket—sat silent watching the gaunt rocky hills slip by as the car sped on, meeting now and then a little string of camels led by bobbed-haired Brahuis or long-ringleted Baluchis, hook-nosed and Biblical.

Monocloid, bidden to lunch, had proposed a run out to Mastung and tea in the garden of the political bungalow there, a little oasis in a dusty land, whose owner was at the moment on tour in his district, and Marjorie had voted immediate acquiescence. Carlos, who asked nothing

better than a peaceful afternoon in the open air, supported her, while Stella, always keen to see new places, was only too willing. Besides, Marjorie generally relapsed into silence after the first few miles of a long drive, and that afternoon Stella wished to have time to think, for the morning mail had brought a long letter from Paul, a letter which showed in every line the strain that the writer was going through.

The letter was in her pocket even now, and as she looked out on the landscape she could recall sentence after sentence of it, and all her being hungered after the man who wrote, hundreds of miles away in a country as bare and gaunt as the one they were now traversing, but a country hostile, unfriendly, a country that might at any moment claim him from her for good, claim even the little of him which was all that she could have. And cold fear stabbed at her heart as she thought of his life there, of his days of piquet work, of the bare reports in the papers, the sparse lines telling that this or that camp had been sniped, that such and such a piquet had been attacked, or the little brief lists informing you that so and so had been hit.

Paul, whom she would give everything she had to have with her again, everything. Not quite everything though, since there were those ideals that she still clung to despite his entreaties, despite the passionate letters like the one her fingers touched even now, letters that grew more and more passionate, more and more appealing, as the man's hunger for her increased day by day.

Was it fair, she asked herself again for the hundredth time—was it fair to refuse him and to refuse herself also happiness that lay at their grasp all for the sake of ideals that were so very flimsy, ideals that so few would, that surely no one would, blame her for relinquishing, ideals scrapped long ago by half the world?

Was she even right after all in considering them ideals? Did they really mean anything at all in the

scheme of things as she visualised it ? Did the Creator in whom she believed, but whose very existence she had once denied to herself, really mean one to cling to them ? Were they not rather fashionings of her own, born perhaps from the distaste for marriage that her experiences had left behind—disgust rather than distaste though, product of the recoil from the earthy side of man and woman as she had seen it ? Was it not perhaps that she had figured a more ethereal relationship, a friendship, a love of mind and soul, something that touched the earth at no point, that made no demands on a part of her nature which had suffered so intensely in the years in chains ?

Was it perhaps that she had been selfish, wanted to have the best of the man she had come to love without giving in return those lesser things which are yet so much to human flesh and blood ? Wanted his mind, his heart, his soul, alone, wanted a relationship that, as he said, was not practicable in a world like ours, where man and woman are yet earthbound, made up of clay and fire still ?

And yet not altogether that, since she had craved often for more than the mere gift of his soul and mind. Craved for the whole of him, craved for him as a man—her man,—as a woman learns to desire in time, to desire the more perhaps for the greater suffering she has endured.

And at the thought there came up into her mind unbidden dreams and pictures of a might-be, dreams and pictures that she fought against sometimes since they could not be, visions of the whole fulness of life as a woman sees it with the man she has chosen to be her mate, the man whose children she longs to bear.

For Stella—childless—had all the passion of motherhood within her, the stronger perhaps since it had never had an outlet, even in the mothering care that a woman will lavish upon a husband when others come not to claim it. Now again, as in the early months of her marriage, before disillusion and bitterness had come

upon her, and left her, as she phrased it, "mummified," her being cried out for fulfilment, for achievement in the woman's sense of the word, the self-realisation that comes to a woman as she watches her children and their father.

The words Kipling puts into the mouth of the Indian noble talking to the ultra-modern childless married woman in London came back to her mind—a story she had read only the day before:—

"Then I, 'Hast thou ever felt the life stir under thy heart, or laid a little son between thy breasts, O most unhappy?'"

He must have been visualising one such as she, it seemed—something isolated, something barren like the rocks and the leafless trees around in this dusty corner of the world that seemed so utterly empty since one man had gone out of it.

What was a woman who had never experienced the joy and pain of giving life—life that is the fruit of perfect love? Were there not more ideals in that than in all the rest? What could her faint visions be compared to the rich happiness that might be hers, the happiness for which she had been made a woman? Surely there was more of the most perfect ideal in being all to the one man, in giving her whole self that he and she might reap fruit beyond all telling. Now she gave gladness to none, added no smallest quota to the sum of human happiness, nor ever would if she continued in the road she had chosen. And if the world was not made for happiness, then God was a mockery; and that she had learnt to feel could not be so, no matter how much man might try to make Him one.

It seemed to her that tiny fingers clutched anew at her heart, tiny fingers that might grow to be like Paul's fine-cut hands, clutched in appeal that would not be silenced.

And once again, as on that September evening under the shadow of Murdar, Stella was very near to yielding, to letting go those ideals of hers that were costing so

much. Then Marjorie's voice broke in upon her thoughts as the car wound its way into the narrow streets among the brown mud houses of the outskirts of Mastung, past the big-walled police-post, and so into the trim garden and fruit-trees of the political bungalow.

"It's a dream of a place, isn't it? And in spring, with all the trees in blossom and the whole place a blaze of colour, it's worth coming miles to see."

They pulled up at the foot of the long flight of steps leading up to the bungalow, its peaceful restful appearance among its flower-beds and lawns accentuated by the little loopholed tower at the corner and the squat Gurkha sentry, reminders that the hills were not so far away, the hills whose tangled mass still hold the raiding gangs, which, like all the border hills, conceal ever the menace of the knife and the lead, for all that under their very feet you may listen to jazz bands at *thés dansants*, or dine under Chinese-lanterns amid shimmer and rustle of satin and silk, laughter of women, and sob of violins.

An aged man appeared from the back of the bungalow, and in time produced them hot water for Marjorie to make tea in the little verandah, while the others explored the garden and climbed up the steep ladder on to the tower to see the landscape around.

"It's a fascinating country," said Carlos, as he leant on the stone coping of the tower looking out over the hill-ringed Mastung plain. "Bone dry, alternately scorched and frozen, and always smothered in dust. And yet it grows on one. Either you like it or you hate it, but you can't be indifferent to it. It's like some people."

"Anyway it's not India," put in Monocloid. "That's probably its attraction."

"And we emphasise the fact by planting a little bit of England in the middle of it like this," said Stella, indicating the garden.

"That's our English habit, isn't it?" said Carlos. "We take home with us in some ways, although we're

always dreaming about getting back, and that's why we own most of the earth. Every one else—the Frenchman, the German, the Spaniard,—when they leave home they adapt themselves to their new surroundings, borrowing left and right in manner and custom. We adapt the surroundings, and remain English all the time.”

“If the Moghuls had done that, and trekked back to Farghana whenever they got old, they'd have been holding India still. But they let India adapt them instead. Ever considered the possibilities of holding India from the north instead of the south? Start a white man's country up on the Siberian border. That's where we ought to be. Top-hole country, ripping climate, no babus, no red tape, no effete Dravidian customs to hamper things.”

“Rather amusing things in some ways, all the same, those Dravidian items, Monocloid. We'll be getting down among them next month, Stella. You've never seen Central India yet, and you'll find it a bit of a change after this,” put in Carlos.

“When are you off, Colonel?” queried Monocloid, polishing his eyeglass.

“First week in January probably. We've got a block in the Toka forest, and if Stella doesn't see a tiger she ought to.”

“You're going Toka way, are you?” said Monocloid, as he replaced his eyeglass. “I'm thinking of going down there too.”

“Wrong direction, isn't it? I thought you always broke out northward.”

“Elasticity is the mark of the live being. That's what I told the Simla bloke what quoted regulations to me. He rather went off the deep end after that. Don't suppose he even knew what the term meant. Rigidity is about the only thing that class of animal knows. *Rigor mortis* more or less. That's why Army Regulations, India, runs into twelve volumes of small print. No, I'm going south this leave.”

But Carlos was tumbling down the ladder in response

to Marjorie's hails to come and make himself useful with the tea-basket. Monocloid turned to Stella—

"That bit of stone of yours was interesting all right," Mrs Nash," he vouchsafed.

"Have you worked out the papers yet?" she asked. Paul had told her about them.

"More or less. Had to sit up half the night most nights to get through with them, but I think we're there or thereabouts now. Ever tried to work out a cipher? Maddening game. You just go on and on and on like a kitten chasing its own tail. Wonder what the young of the Manx cat does by the way? Anyway, it's clear as the Hidden Hand behind the Reform scheme now, that Pierre Rivecourt and his funny pals buried the local treasury somewhere in Taragurh. And it's equally clear that your bit of jade and Merriboy's bit come into the picture. Taragurh ain't so far from Toka. Hence when you're luxuriating in machans waiting for tigers to come and be killed I shall be doing the Robert Louis stunt round about the mouldering ruins of Badulla's Tower of Victory. Wish Merriboy could get a spot of leave though and chip in. Hulloo, there's Mrs Carlos getting agitated! Time we waded in on the buns, I take it. Mind how you fall!"

He slithered down the ladder, and Stella followed him to where Marjorie was pouring out tea and Carlos—sunk in a long chair—was munching sandwiches.

"Lucky we came this week," said Marjorie. "We couldn't have come next Sunday with the happy couple in residence."

"What happy couple?" queried Monocloid, gathering up another cake. He has a fondness for sugar things.

"Why, Major Paige and Miss Hardy. Aren't you coming to the wedding? They've been lent this place for the honeymoon."

"Suppose it's all right. Thirty miles from anywhere, and a garden that looks a trifle wintry. But old

man Paige'll go daft after a week with no one to have a drink with."

The Hardy girl and Paige had finally decided to join forces, and Stella admitted that Marjorie had been wise in the matter. Both were of the rather simple type that doesn't worry much about thought, and probably doesn't feel too deeply. Life for both was made up largely of games, hockey and tennis, or bridge and the society of their fellows. Neither had any particular fondness for books or music, or art of any description. Both liked a crowd about them, were at their best in a gaily-chattering milieu, either of club bar or drawing-room. Both were popular, and would go on being popular until they retired, doubtless he to take up the secretaryship of some golf club at home, where they would continue in the same way. No; Mastung would probably pall on them after a week, for the girl as much as for the man.

And thinking of them, Stella wondered whether life would not be much easier if one was made like the Hardy girl, for instance, drifting along on the surface of life like a shallow stream, no capability for glimpsing the high lights, but also in consequence no danger of being submerged in the dark shadows. After all, the finer your feelings, the more sensitive you are; the more capable of experiencing the keenest joys, the more ready you are to feel also the keener suffering, for the very acuteness of the perceptions that enables you to rise to heights which others never even see, permits, nay, forces you sometimes, to enter gulfs of darkness that more superficial minds can never know.

And yet perhaps even if one suffered, was it not better to be more finely strung; did not the heights more than compensate for the depths, the more vivid lights for the darker shadows?

Then as they slipped out of Mastung again she thought that neither she nor Paul would tire of that garden, of the quiet peace of the little bungalow in the heart of the sandy plain ringed with hills, now tinged with

all the softest, most delicate colours, rose and madder, lilac and mauve and blue, under the turquoise sky already paling slightly as the sun sank westward to the horizon's golden rim.

They passed a little train puffing its slow way up the incline into the gorge towards Spezand Station, infinitely tiny in the immense landscape of towering hill and lifeless plain; and as the car swung up the winding road to the pass and came into the shadow of the hills, Stella, drawing her furs closer about her, for there is no heat away from the sun in Baluchistan of a winter evening, felt a shadow of loneliness creep over her again, felt how infinitely small life seemed in these wastes, in the hills that stood around as they had stood for æons before life first crept about their feet, as they would stand æons after the last life had perished, gaunt towering heights, impassive, changeless.

And once again she wondered what difference could the action of a mite like her make to life. Why should she think that any action of hers could make any difference to the world? They wound their way up in the blue-shadowed coldness of the pass, the thin air stinging their faces as a slight breeze came over, and stopped at the top to pass the time of day with three ragged levy men with ancient rifles, who held a tiny post at the summit.

"It depends on what the woman sees at the end of the road." Paul's words were in her ears again as she sat there listening uncomprehendingly to Carlos and Monocloid talking to the gaunt men on the roadside, who had tumbled down from their post to demand matches. Was there anything at the end of the road after all? Why not take the road as it came, take the companionship that offered now instead of going on alone for the sake of the vision of a distant star that probably didn't exist at all? Take happiness, make happiness for one other, ere the shadows came down finally for all time.

Then as the car slid forward again down the hill, Carlos turned and pointed in front.

"That'd be worth painting, wouldn't it, Marjorie. Look!"

"Rose-pink mountains and glint of sunlit snow." Stella recalled her own answer to Paul. There it lay in front of her with the long road winding away below them, a white twisting ribbon losing itself in the formless haze of the plain below, mile after mile as she knew though she could not see, mile after mile of dusty road veiled in a hazy grey landscape, but at the far end?

Yes, there it was! Long shadows of mauve and violet above the blue haze on the far side, and then hung above them in the clear pale sky, vivid sunlit snow rose-pink as the rays of the setting sun lit on it, turning even as she watched to warmer red, like the flush on a girl's cheek, warmer still ere it faded and died to leave the snows all faint ivory against the Eastern sky with high above them the clear light of a single star.

And to Stella it seemed at that moment almost an answer to her doubts, a promise that come what might on the way, dust, haze, and mist, weary miles of foot-sore plodding in loneliness of soul, at the end somewhere after the dusty flats the road would wind its way up past fruit-trees and flowers, past rippling mountain streams and upland meadows, into the flower valleys under the high snows, to the gardens of all promise.

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CHAPTER XV.

ACTION.

THE hills above the Takhi Zam lay shimmering in the sun, grey slopes intersected with steep-banked nullahs, bush-sprinkled, stone-strewn hillsides, bare and gaunt under the vivid cloudless blue of a December morning. The air was biting cold out of the sun, and in the shady patches below the willow-trees little cakes of ice fringed the river edges.

The day piqueting troops were in position, and the long line of laden camels paced its slow way up towards Piazza—camels laden with boxes of ammunition, tins of ghi and bags of flour, bales of blankets, and cases of medical stores. The sarwans plodded alongside of their nose-roped beasts, splashing through the little fast-running streams, where here and there were groups of sepoy washing themselves or their clothes, and at one point a couple of British officers fishing in the placid waters of a rock-bound pool.

A still silence hung over the landscape, save where towards the Barari piquets some enthusiastic soul was testing a Lewis gun, and once, high overhead, the droning hum of a 'plane winging its way towards far Makin to drop a load of bombs, lest the raiding tribesmen there might think themselves immune from punishment.

Paul Merriman, cursing his luck at his regiment being sent out of its turn to piquet the road, was sitting in the sunshine below Bronze Hill, watching the convoy making its way up-stream. Just below him in the

river-bed were his three reserve platoons, and an assistant surgeon with a couple of stretchers and a few hospital ponies.

He had rather counted on a quiet day in camp, when he might write at length to Stella in reply to her last letter, which showed so obviously to the man beginning to wear under the constant strain of the ever-present hunger for the woman he wanted, a lack of comprehension of the point of view that he had so laboured to make clear.

Pages and pages he had written of his crying need for her, and in reply nothing but more talk of ideals, of the parts they had to play, of hanging on till some day the road should lead them out into the sunshine together. And here was he in Mahsudland, where the road has no ending save only in the darkness of falling night, while the precious hours of sunshine, the short, all too short, years of life were slipping away so fast.

And once again he had passed a more than usually sleepless night with his thoughts—thoughts distorted by the smoky glare of the little torches of doubt which glimmered in the dark recesses of a mind that had come to know what real hunger is—what the hunger for a woman can come to spell to a man,—the more so for the fact that hitherto woman had entered so little into his life. Silence of thoughts alive with the unceasing murmur of the suggestive voices that spoke to him incessantly of the futility of it all, of the selfishness of Stella's line of action, of the fact that she could not really love him, no matter what she said. Voices that talked so skilfully and plausibly concerning her letters, that picked out so easily the weak points of her arguments, that pointed out so unerringly the falsities of her premises, the fallibilities of her conclusions.

If only he could be with her he might convince her of the sole logical course, to take the present, to grasp happiness ere happiness slipped for ever from their reach. Make her realise that the present was the only time that mattered, that life is now, not to-morrow that

never materialises, unfulfilled to-morrow that mocks you unceasingly, since when you reach it it is only to find that it is already yesterday. But the leave that he had counted on so intensely was denied him, now that Atkinson had gone sick, finally laid out by the rheumatism he had made light of for so long. As far as Paul could see he was likely to stay where he was for the next ten or twelve months without any chance of getting back to Quetta or of joining the Carlos in that trip to the Central Provinces which Stella told him they had planned.

Christmas Day that day week! Christmas Day that he had promised himself would be spent in the Carlos' homey bungalow at Quetta, with Stella all day and every day, long walks in the hills they loved so much, long rides on the sunlit roads between the little water-channels under the fruit-trees, cosy evenings by the firelight where they might talk undisturbed and he could plead with her, plead for the happiness which was surely theirs of right.

And now Christmas would be spent up here at Sorarogha, probably even as to-day, piqueting this hateful so-called "road," waiting for the enemy attack that never came, tramping out in the dawn light up the stony river-bed, breaking through the ice of the frozen pools, to return in the evening with sodden boots and puttees and numbed feet, to eat bully-beef stew or tough ration mutton, and drink rum and cocoa until it was time to crawl into one's blankets in the stuffy tent that seemed nevertheless to let in every wind that blew from every corner of the bleak horizon.

Black depression settled down upon him as he sat there chewing the mouthpiece of his pipe, watching the camels passing—dull monotonous stream,—while below him his men sat grouped about the edges of a little field. The depression of unending to-morrows all the same as to-day, of grey vistas of life that held nothing of all that he had learnt now life might hold if only some one would be sensible, take things as every one else did,

cast overboard the lumber of impracticable ideals, treat life as life is surely meant to be treated—affair of flesh and blood, of this present; rest content with the real woman's part of making heaven for one man instead of sitting with her head in the clouds, denying him, denying herself for the sake of phantom visions of what ought to be, dreams of a human destiny that existed nowhere save in the thoughts of visionaries who had long ago lost all touch with the hot desire that moves in the blood of every man and woman who has any claim to the name.

The Lewis gun on Barari had ceased its stammering chatter; the 'plane had vanished far northward, where occasional dull muffled echoes spoke to the long yellow bombs spinning earthward to vanish in puffs of smoke and dust among the scattered towers and mud houses of the Makin valley; and the still peace of noonday lay upon the hills, vividly outlined against the turquoise of the sky. The long string of camels—it was a biggish convoy that day—had been doubled now by the downward movement of unladen camels from Piazza. Paul looked at his watch, and wondered how late they would be out to-day. Then as he looked, a ragged burst of fire about Woodlands piquet behind him, followed by the staccato echo of a Lewis gun from Gibraltar, a sudden swirl in the convoy, where three or four camels lay kicking and struggling on the ground, brought him to his feet as his men below galvanised into life, snatching up their rifles and jumping to the Lewis guns that had been off-saddled where the mules sought scanty grazing.

A swirl of bullets passing overhead and the deadened burst of a bomb on the hill above, and then all thoughts of Stella and the might-be were swept from his mind by the instant need of action to cope with that often threatened, hitherto never realised, situation of a tribal attack upon the road, as Smithers came breasting the slope towards him seeking orders, and the first ragged bursts of fire swelled and steadied into a constant crackle

that seemed to come from every hill around, and the four stricken camels, turned to a dozen, then to a score, with now among them still human forms or struggling figures of wounded men clawing their way to cover.

Paul—gifted with a keen imagination—was that class of thinking soldier who almost mechanically visualises possible situations long before they ever materialise. One hears much loose talk about the power of quick thinking in moments of action, but most often the apparent rapidity of thought that seems almost genius is but the outcome of previous visualisation, and the instant orders that turn a possible disaster into success are not flashes of inspiration in circumstances where others would hesitate so much as orders given mentally half a dozen times before in a landscape empty of enemy.

So as he raced up the slope to the skyline where a small piquet of men, strung out behind rocks and boulders, were firing rapidly, he knew even before he reached them what was to be done—where to put in his reserves, where the enemy would be; and as Smithers caught him up just on the crest, two red-armleted runners panting behind him, he saw before him just the scene that he had mentally pictured so many times before.

Woodlands piquet to his left was lifeless, save for the chatter of the Lewis gun, the desultory rifle-shots, and the constant smack of bullets against the rough-piled stone walls; and from the bush-covered hills 400 yards ahead of it the steady rattle of musketry, where the Mahsud marksmen methodically smothered the piquet to prevent it interfering with the attack upon the convoy in process down the long nullah that wound into the river-bed a little lower down the stream. There the younger bloods, often armed with knife alone, were collecting to rush the huddled mass of camels and unarmed sarwans halted in confusion on the edge of the bullet-swept zone, where the river-bed lay open to the hail of yet another party of enemy marksmen, who had crept up to a lower feature beyond Woodlands.

As he reached his little day piquet—passing a wounded man, blood pouring from the sleeve that concealed the shattered arm, making his stumbling way down the steep hillside—he noted Garhwali piquet to his right in the same case as Woodland's, with Bronze Hill sprinkled with Mahsud snipers overhanging it, whence a steady stream of lead beat down incessantly.

A small enemy party were carrying on a duel with the piquet he reached, and every now and then bullets zipped past, where, crouching in the lee of a boulder, he sized up the position. Yes, as he had always argued they would, the enemy were taking advantage of the bush-covered nullahs to get down to the river-bed, secure from interference from the permanent stone-walled piquets, thanks to the covering parties of marksmen so cunningly posted higher up. He must work his men along behind Woodlands and get above the enemy in the nullah—a process that for part of the way anyhow would bring them into full view of the Mahsuds concealed in the bush between Gibraltar and Woodland's.

He turned to Smithers—

“Shove along quick with two platoons behind Woodlands, and get on the edge of the nullah with your right on the piquet. You know the ground. Don't go down into the nullah yet. But once there you can prevent anything more coming down or any camels being got away up it. I'm stopping here with the other platoon and company headquarters for the moment. They may be going to come in here as well, though I doubt it. Get a move on quick!”

The men had followed them up the slope, and were halted under cover just below, and in two minutes Smithers, his platoons filing along after him under cover of the crest, was making his way over the broken ground towards Woodlands and the nullahs beyond. Paul looked round again, and from the fire that rattled incessantly from beyond Garhwali to Gibraltar's circular piquet on the hump-backed hill down-stream he estimated that there were not less than 200 of the enemy

engaged. High in the sky nearly three miles away the winking heliograph of Bluff piquet on the high ridge between him and Sorarogha camp clamoured for news as the wind carried the noise of the fire down-stream, and the piquets on the opposite bank set telephone and heliograph buzzing and winking right and left. He hailed a signaller, and, squatting under cover, scribbled a hurried message to Sorarogha to explain the noise. Ten minutes to get through perhaps, fifteen minutes to turn out the reserve companies that always lay ready, and an hour at least to come up to the southern edge of the fight. An hour and a half at the most optimistic computation before help could come. For the moment he must be content merely to hold his ground. Another message sped north towards Piazza, although the fight lay outside their province.

Then he turned again to watch the fight, and as he picked up his glasses a hot stab swept across the muscles of his left arm, and the glasses dropped to the ground. "Zip! zip! swish!" The fire was getting a bit hotter undoubtedly, thought Paul, as his orderly ripped up the jersey sleeve, laying bare the long-jagged tear across the back of the arm, and hurriedly tied it up with the first field-dressing.

"Only the left arm, thank goodness," he reflected as the man finished. "Stretcher-bearers, quick!" Another man in the strung-out piquet-line had rolled over, clutching at his belt, his dark face paling even as Paul looked. And as two stretcher-bearers hauled the dying man down to cover amid the sudden whiplash flick of bullets that greeted their appearance, Paul called to the Indian officer of the remaining platoon to get his Lewis gun into action farther to the left.

"Don't be an owl, Fazal Din!" he said impatiently in the vernacular to his orderly, who was suggesting his retirement towards the assistant surgeon and the stretchers now cuddled into a small ravine below, where several wounded men had already come in. "It's only a scratch." He tucked his left hand slowly into his

belt, for the arm was already a bit unresponsive, and picked up his glasses, luckily undamaged by the fall. Snithers' platoons were just crossing the nullah below Woodlands, the leading men breasting the hill in front, clambering cat-like up its steep sides, Smithers' long legs well in evidence.

The convoy had split into three parts: those down-stream of the nullah, covered by the enemy, had broken back in haste to comparative safety behind Gibraltar; those below Paul were hurrying back up-stream; and isolated in the river-bed, just below Woodlands among the jumble of fallen camels and dead and wounded men, some seventy or eighty beasts and their sarwans, cut off by fire ahead and fire in rear, huddled irresolutely.

Then even as he looked there was a rush of figures out of the unseen nullah mouth beyond, grimy grey clothes, and quick flash of knives slashing at head-ropes, stabbing at the unarmed camel men. Then as he turned to shout to the Lewis gunners beyond in the hope that they might be able to get on to the fleeting target, he saw the first of that batch of camels led away into the nullah, and thanked his stars for having sent Smithers on without waiting.

Smithers' men were on the crest now, running as they came under the bullets of the Mahsuds beyond, whose fire redoubled in intensity as they realised that he might yet cut off the party in the nullah and either stop or kill the camels, who, together with their loads and perhaps the rifles of a piquet here and there, were the prize for which the Mahsud had set out, a prize to be sweetened by slaying in the process as many of the hated intruders as possible.

Paul watched them disappear over the skyline, two men dropping in the process, watched a couple of stretcher-bearers drag the casualties under cover and go on after the rest, slipped down a few feet under the hill-top, and with his orderly and runner followed them, bidding the Indian officer get his platoon into position half-way between where they now were and the slope

over which Smithers had just passed. As he turned to go a signaller came up with a message from Sorarogha to say that the troops were turning out now, and would be under way within ten minutes of the message leaving.

As he stumbled down the slope and plodded up the incline in front, feeling the inconvenience of the useless arm that seemed to upset all his balance on the hillside, listening to the growing volume of fire in front, he wondered whether Smithers had got there in time to catch that party who were trying to get the camels away.

He came up over the crest from the quiet of the little nullah, and once again the bullets zipped past from the front and sung overhead from the right, where Woodlands loomed dead still against the skyline, the figure of a signaller sheltering in the doorway calling up Barrier piquet on the opposite bank, the only point that could be reached without undue exposure to the snipers around. He broke into a run, his orderly and runner right and left behind him, and the three sped across the hilltop and down again in a whispering shower of lead, to where, nestling under some tumbled boulders, Smithers' runners were discernible by their red arm-bands, and Smithers himself coned the fight from the cover of a rock.

"How's things going?" queried Paul, as he tumbled into shelter after a glance to see that both his men had come through untouched.

"Stopped the b—— all right, Major. But I think they're going to make a fight for it. Fire's getting very hot, and they're moving up towards us. Got it bad?"

"Only an outer," replied Paul, as he took in the scene around.

Below them in the nullah showed the fallen bodies of a few camels shot just in time as Smithers' men reached there. The remainder were presumably hidden in the nullah near the river unable to get on. The Mahsuds had melted into the hillsides around, cuddled into patches of shadow, invisible among the scattered bushes

and stones, their presence only marked by the whimpering of the bullets that flicked past, or sang away complainingly overhead, or splashed into stars of lead on the stones, or now and then finished their journey with the dull triumphant "plump" that might mean so many things. Might mean anything from another little job for the doctor, or a welcome cheap bought spot of leave in India, to the quiet burial in the nitched hole, while half a dozen comrades around with folded hands chant the "jenaza"—last prayer for the sleeper ere the falling earth let Nakir and Munkir, the inquiring angels, speak with him to ask if he believes in God and in Muhammad, the Prophet of God, so that he may enter the gardens of Paradise among the sloe-eyed damsels in the shade of the trees of everlasting fruit.

To Paul's right two sections of riflemen and a Lewis-gun team, bobbed-haired Punjabis, lay out on the stony hillside answering bullet for bullet, the unseen foe in front. The fourth section was to the left, shooting hard into the nullah below them, where three still figures showed sprawling, two face down, one on its back with drawn-up limbs, baggy trousers, and coarse, grey, cotton garments that had once been white, and a camel with neck writhed back still struggled at intervals.

Just in rear the second platoon were grouped into a fold of ground that gave scant cover, waiting for the enemy to close if close he intended to. The Indian officer commanding the leading platoon came running up to Smithers, bullets knocking up dust at his heels as he came.

"They're pushing up on the right, sahib," he panted. "They're crossing the nullah even now in ones and twos." And as he spoke the crash of a couple of bombs from the extreme right verified his statement as the right-hand section pitched over grenades into the dead ground below, and the sudden flicker of steel marked the imminence of the enemy that called for bayonets to be fixed.

"Right - oh, Jemadar sahib. I'll throw in Akbar Khan's platoon if they get too near," and, all confidence

in his boyish leader's coolness and still more in the presence of the quiet-voiced quiet-eyed Major with the bandaged arm who had soldiered with him for the past ten years, the Jemadar scurried back to his post on the right, his orderly trailing at his heels like a dog, where the bullets showed in little spurts of dust.

"Think they're going to rush, Major?" asked Smithers as the Indian officer went off.

"Probably. They know it's only a question of time before the troops come up from camp. You'd better watch it." Paul believed in not interfering with his subordinates. Smithers was a cool-headed youngster, and could be trusted. But Paul intended none the less to be there in case of need. "If they don't close with you soon they don't stand a chance of getting the loot away. And when they do come in you'll get a proper slating from the ground in front. I'm going back now to the top. I'll be handy with the rest if we're wanted. Don't worry to send back; I'll be watching."

Once more he trotted out into the open among the dust spurts up the slope he had descended, and ever a pace behind him went the Khuttack runner and the Punjabi orderly, fighting peasantry of a large inherited belief in Allah and an infinite proven belief in their sahibs of the laughing mouths, the cheerful speech, and the resolute eyes that saw everything straightly and unafraid.

And as he went the men he left looked round, and as they turned again to the fight plied their rifles with the more confidence for that the Major sahib had come to see, which meant that whatever happened, whatsoever the sons of shameless mothers in front devised, Merriman sahib would have something better to combat it.

"May their noseless sisters rot in hell!" muttered Fazal Din as a bullet smashed through his water-bottle, and another zipped past his face so close that he blinked and stumbled.

"And their lecherous aunts join them," added the Khuttack runner, catching the remark as he tumbled

over the crest-line into the sudden quiet beyond where the reserve platoon squatted, waiting orders.

Paul settled himself between two boulders to watch Smithers below him, cursing his useless left arm and the sticky blood that had got over his glasses as he tried to clean them one-handed. The crash of bombs was more marked now on Smithers' right, where the thick cover and the broken nullah banks gave a chance to the enemy to get very close unseen. Paul called up his Indian officer behind, and gave him orders to bring his platoon closer and be ready to counter-attack down the hill if need arose.

Gibraltar's Lewis gun stammered away merrily, and just above him Woodlands was noisy with crack of rifle and smack of bullet, while ever on the far sky-line Bluff's helio winked and twinkled, spelling out some message or other, either for him or for far Piaza. A runner came up from behind with a message-pad.

"Supporting troops passing Barari," Paul read in the vernacular spelt out in the big clumsy Roman letters as he initialled the pad. Three-quarters of an hour more, say, and then the Mahsud would begin to feel the sting from down-stream.

Hulloa, the enemy were coming in! The right of Smithers' line suddenly broke into glint of steel as a rush of figures came up the nullah bank and the hillside ahead livened with sudden shower of lead. The Mahsuds swarmed over the right-hand section, scurry of knife and bayonet, and then in came Smithers' second platoon, flinging them back again down the slope.

"Good lad," said Paul, as the line straightened once more, but several still forms dotted about spoke to the cost. He saw Smithers running over to the right to speak to the Indian officer, and as the lad reached him saw the Indian officer crumple up slowly in a huddled heap, saw Smithers grab him by the belt, and lug him into a little hollow ere he settled under cover himself.

Smithers didn't like it evidently, changing his position like that. Probably something more materialising there.

Paul saw him waving up his last two sections closer, and then saw him look back once or twice, and presently a runner came up the hill towards him, who even as he reached Paul pitched forward on his face with a smashed ankle.

Fazal Din and the Khuttack runner hauled him down the slope while Paul read the hurried scribble from Smithers. "Collecting on my right again; fifteen casualties; may want help next time."

Fifteen casualties out of the fifty-two he had with him. Yes; he probably would want a helping hand. If they lost the nullah bank the enemy would get away the camels and the loot. Yet if he put in his last platoon there would be nothing left in hand. But surely the supporting troops must be through the Barari now. Another half-hour or less should see them in the fight, and then all would be over except the shouting and the picking up the bits.

He called the Indian officer up again, and the platoon, strung out in attack formation, watched him, waiting like hounds on the leash. A salvo of bombs, renewed splutter of rifle-fire, and as Smithers' line swirled into life once more—glint of bayonet, flash of knife, and swinging rifle-butt where brown jersey and cotton shirt met in frenzied onslaught—Paul with that last platoon at his heels was up and over the crest-line, down the slope as fast as he could go, amid the sudden crack of bullets that greeted them. But the pace was too fast even for the marksmen yonder, and almost without a casualty he and the platoon behind him flung into the fight, flung into the fight as Smithers pitched over backwards with a bullet through his chest, and Paul's revolver spat into the face of a lithe Mahsud knifeman, jumping clear of the dead sepoy whose rifle he had seized. The man's hands went half up to his smashed-in features as he spun round into eternity, and Paul's platoon of Khuttacks, with bayonet and butt, hunted the last of the enemy over into the nullah again ere they flung themselves prone to shelter from the un-

ceasing lead that beat down upon them from the further slopes.

Smithers, white-faced and limp under the shadow of the rock where his men had dragged him, smiled a twisted smile as Paul bent over him. "Thought you'd chip in, Major. You're always on time," he whispered ere he lapsed again into unconsciousness as Merriman wiped the frothy blood from his lips, and with Fazal Din's help turned him over on his side to give him a chance of breathing.

Then as Paul settled into the place where Smithers had been, he saw beyond Gibraltar the first line of squat helmet-crowned figures, heard the new rattle of fire, which showed that the Gurkha companies from Sorarogha were getting close.

The fire briskened again as the foiled enemy withdrew from the river-bank, and the Mahsuds with the camels abandoning their prizes snaked their way up the nullah banks, running the gauntlet of Paul's men above, figures leaping from rock to rock, bolting from ravine to ravine.

Then as the long lines debouched either side of Gibraltar and the little groups of Gurkhas advanced methodically from nullah to nullah, clearing out such enemy as hung on, Paul realised that the danger was passing, that, save for the dead and wounded, nothing was lost—not a camel, not a load of stores,—and that, more, he had given at least as good as he got.

The Gurkhas were very near now, and the rattle of enemy fire in front died away, though above them, beyond Woodlands, the Mahsud covering party still sniped methodically to prevent the piquet from interfering with the attacking party's withdrawal. Paul turned round to look at Smithers again, and as he did so a last dropping shower of lead came over, and something that felt like a hockey-stick caught him below the knee, knocking his legs from under him. Mechanically he tried to break his fall from the rock three or four feet above the ground with his wounded arm, which

refused to move quick enough, pitched on the side of his head on a stone ; and as darkness closed about him and the fight faded, saw Stella's face vivid for an instant—Stella with the grey eyes and the appealing lips, Stella protesting, as it were, at being out of his mind even for two or three hours. A vision that persisted even when returning consciousness found him on a stretcher with the assistant surgeon bandaging up his leg, where the bullet had gone through from back to front, and the last echoes of the fight were dying away in the hills beyond.

CHAPTER XVI.

SHIVA.

THE rock-temples of Taragurh lay bathed in vivid moonlight, shafts of silver falling athwart the entrance doors or glistening on carven lintel and tracery of pillar, on hewn image of man and beast ; silver shafts accentuated by the utter blackness that lay beyond, save where in one place a hole in the roof let in a circular beam, which fell upon a little-stepped tank in the centre of one of the open spaces between the cells.

The night was still and cool, the soft freshness of the cold-weather night of Central India, heavy with scent of flowering shrub and drowsy with perfume of waxy flowers from the creepers that twined about the entrance.

But Taylor—lamp in hand,—making his way through the temples, was unaware either of the stillness or of the scents that hung about the place. Little receptive to those exterior appeals to the senses that have such a potent effect on others more keenly attune to nature, which rouse up whole hosts of feelings and desires, to him the temples were merely mouldering stonework whose heart concealed the entrance to the passage he had broken in upon that November night, when his calculations had brought him what seemed at first success in the quest he had followed so painstakingly.

And yet to-night as he passed behind the great image of Shiv, and with accustomed hands pressed the heavy stone counterpoise which opened before him a little square doorway in what had hitherto seemed solid stonework against the rock-face, he wondered—won-

dered if in reality he had found anything more than yet another of the tunnels with which the whole hill of Taragurh seemed honeycombed, passages of all dates, rock-hewn tunnels, bricked-in galleries with sides of flat thin tiles like those in the Moghul forts, arched-stone passages of obviously Muhammedan make, or crude flat-roofed one of earlier Hindu type.

As he closed the concealed door behind him and made his way up the slope of the low rock-tunnel whose unornamented sides still showed the mark of pick and crow that had torn out the soft rock hundreds of years before, when perhaps the almond-eyed images he had left were in process of fashioning, he pondered again as to where and which of the many tunnels was the one down which Pierre Rivecourt and his associates had hurried night after night to conceal the Nawab's treasure.

For when on the night of his first discovery he had broken in through the roof of the tunnel under the grass-grown marble-edged courts now somewhere high on the hill above him, and with infinite precaution let himself down into the close still darkness looming below, he had imagined that the quest was over, that there now remained only to break into the walled-up treasure-house somewhere at the end, gather up his reward, and leave barren Taragurh for the fleshpots of civilisation.

But as he had made his way along the stone-lined tunnel which eventually became a rock-walled passage hewn out of the heart of the hill, leading downwards and ever downwards, his lamp had shown him at least a dozen side-arms that would have to be explored, side-arms some of which had seemed in precarious condition with cracked arching and crumbling sides. He had stuck to the main gallery, to find himself at last at a dead end, where the passage appeared to be closed by the solid rock. Waiting there a space, trying to fathom the reason for a tunnel of this length leading apparently nowhere, he remarked certain stone loops cut in the rock in front, then realised that though years of dust

had levelled up the cracks so that the face appeared solid and one with the side-walls, in reality it was a cunningly-fitted door. His hands had trembled with excitement, and his heart thumped against his ribs in the close warm air as he had studied the door, pulled and tugged at the stone-cut loops let into the massive block. But only after several hours did he find the controlling mechanism, the sliding block which swung open the door; and then, as the smooth stone slid wide on its base, to his intense surprise from its black mouth had come the soft coolness of the open night air and the faint radiance of far-off moonlight. He stepped through the opening, to find himself in the last court of the rock-temples under the impassive figure of Shiv, looking down upon him with unseeing eyes as it danced upon the pigmy figures below its relentless feet.

With a muttered curse he had sat down a moment to let the fresh breeze play upon his face after the stale air of the tunnel he had descended, the little yellow flame of the hurricane lamp playing upon the carven images around, twining coils of stone serpents with myriad-headed fan-like necks, grimacing heads of many-armed human figures, black and menacing, half seen in the surrounding gloom.

Then as his mind began to work again after the shock of disappointment when the opening door had revealed to him in place of the piled-up treasure chamber he had expected merely the old temples, he realised that he had solved one thing at least, how it was that, despite the besieging troops, Gopal Tiwari had been able to hide his piece of jade under the big image although the temples lay without the walls.

And with the thought confidence returned once more. Obviously the hiding-place lay in one of those side passages he had passed, probably walled off cunningly by the hand of Pierre Rivecourt, who had mentioned doing mason's work in company with Mahmud Hussein. The thing now was to explore them all methodically until he found the right one. So after an hour or so spent

examining the door until at last he had grasped thoroughly the mechanism which opened and closed it both from within and from the temple side, he retraced his steps up the long tunnel.

For the next three weeks he had tackled each side arm carefully and methodically, often at the risk of his life from the crumbling state of the walls and roofs. He longed many times for an assistant, but dared not take either of his men into his confidence. But each passage in turn had revealed nothing. Sometimes they ended in blank-rock faces, sometimes in little store-rooms empty for the most part, one filled with rotting grain-sacks. Once breaking through a mouldering iron-studded door in a side wall he had stumbled upon two skeletons with chains upon their feet, relic of some past tragedy utterly forgotten.

Finally, he had bethought him of following the passage upwards instead of downwards from the point where he had first broken in. With infinite pains he had re-closed the hole he had made, covering up the broken masonry and replacing the excavated earth so that now no trace showed above, and since then he entered always at the secret door in the temple.

Beyond the point of his first entry the passage sloped very slightly upwards, leading, it seemed, towards the higher side of the hill, where lay the ruins of the palace. He had gone up it once, but there were no side-arms in that portion of it, and—a thing which puzzled him somewhat—as he went farther it seemed to him that the walls, instead of being bone-dry, showed here and there patches of moisture. Only when he came to the end and plotted with meticulous care his position on the map he had made of the hill did he realise that the tunnel led under the two great tanks of slimy water which lay almost at the highest point of the hill, spring-fed tanks that had been the chief water-supply of the old fort.

Possibly the tunnel he was now following had at some period been designed as an aqueduct to lead off the

water to lower levels, possibly to underground tanks, where the excess water gathered during the rainy season could be stored against an emergency.

And to-night he proposed to make a thorough examination of the upper part of the passage, and see whether perhaps he had not missed some bricked-up arm that might lead him to the point he sought.

He went slowly, studying the walls with infinite care, seeking any fault in the masonry, any alteration of stone-and-brick course that might betray a hidden chamber or a concealed tunnel, tapping the stonework in the hope of hearing it ring hollow. But all in vain: everywhere the walls gave forth the same dead sound that showed the solid ground behind them. And so, finally, after several hours' work, he came to the point where the passage roof, instead of being curved rounded stones, was made up of two big flat slabs, the slime about their edges speaking to the tanks above.

Evidently these blocks had moved at some time, forming, as it were, a drain for the tanks, but try as he might Taylor had failed to discover any mechanism for them. Obviously mechanism, if it still existed, would be on the upper side of the passage, or more probably somewhere outside altogether, for once those slabs were opened the whole weight of the tank water would pour down the passage until it filled it right up to the concealed doorway in the temple, or, if that were open, sweep out through the temples down the stony hillside below.

Beyond the tank level the passage continued a little way, to end abruptly in a heap of fallen earth and masonry, through which Taylor now intended to dig his way. The job was ticklish, for there was no guarantee that more of the roof might not come about his head. But the fall appeared of very old date and the earth above dry and solid, while through the little chink at the top his electric-torch had shown the passage winding on, apparently still in good order.

He set down the load of tools he was carrying, hung

the hurricane-lamp upon a nail he drove into the wall, took off his coat, and set to work with pick and shovel, one careful eye upon the roof above him. But luck held, for nothing fell from above, and within an hour and a half he had cleared the passage sufficiently to allow him to pass right through. Beyond him lay the stone-walled arched passage, now again unbroken.

Another hour to clear finally the last of the fallen débris, and then, taking pick and shovel with him lest at his return he might find a fresh fall barring his way, he continued up the narrow tunnel. Ten minutes later saw him in a maze of little underground chambers, possibly store-rooms, most of them empty, though in one were some rusted weapons, piles of stone cannon-ball, and an old matchlock, whose butt had long since rotted away.

By the bearings he had taken he should now be close upon the old palace, and though so far he had failed to locate anything that looked like a hiding-place, at least he could perhaps find the other exit to the passage, or rather the entry from the palace, and that would give him a way of retreat if a fall occurred at any time between him and the temple door. He had no desire to die like a rat in a trap, and that fear haunted him many a night as he wandered about the passages or worked single-handed at his excavations—the dread of dying there in the darkness, perhaps half-buried and unable to move, with fallen masonry piled upon his shattered limbs, his lamp smashed or extinguished. It was the one picture that Taylor could visualise, and did visualise frequently, though his determination carried him along, and his intense hope of finding the wealth that would allow him to lead the life he desired, let him gratify his every wish, was the most potent spur that a man of his temperament could have.

Then at the end of a small passage leading off from the warren of vaulted chambers he came upon what he sought—a flight of stone steps leading upwards into a stone-walled shaft, closed at the top, with a flat trapdoor of stone.

The stone was firmly embedded—clearly it had not been moved for many years,—and only after an hour's work did Taylor succeed in forcing it up a few inches with the crowbar. Then as he strained at it to move it farther it up-ended suddenly, balanced cunningly just to one side of its centre, poised so that pressure from above applied just at the right point would tilt it, and, pushing through the opening, he found himself in one of the rooms in the ruined palace, with the moonlight falling on broken marble window and carved pillars of sandstone.

It was in fact the room occupied over a century before by Gopal Tiwari, the very room where Pierre Rivecourt had lain wounded watching the Mahrattas refreshing the old Brahman's memory with the aid of the dull-glowing charcoal and the sullen red of hot spear-point. The room where, though Taylor knew it not, since Rivecourt had made no mention of it in his record, as Gopal lay dying and the Italians had rescued Rivecourt from the same fate as the Brahman, the Mahrattas sounding the floor had found the trapdoor, and, forcing it open, pushed their way down into the long passage beyond in search of the treasure which to Indian minds is the inevitable accompaniment of kings' palaces. But Taylor had no inkling of this, nor did he know that later on during the Mahratta occupation the passage had been in constant use, being only closed finally when British domination bringing cessation of wars and raids, the chief had removed himself to Toka. There his descendants now played polo or spent their substance on racing motor-cars and much-engraved high-velocity rifles, forgetting by degrees their ancestors of the hot spear-points and the charcoal, those hereditary raiders who had ravaged India from the damp warm shores of Bombay to the Mahratta dyke about Calcutta on the opposite coast.

The chamber in which he stood was close to the one whence he had taken the bearing to the Tower of Victory, which showed now through the broken marble screen-

work of the little window, a tall pillar of ivory in the bright moonlight, a fact which to his mind showed that he was on the right track. But now since he had explored the passage from end to end, examined all the side tunnels, what was to be his next move? Could it be that one of the many subterranean rooms that he had visited had held the treasure, and that all unknown to Pierre Rivecourt the Mahrattas had at some later time found the Nawab's hidden hoard? Suppose all his labour had been in vain; suppose there was nothing to be found? Foreboding stabbed at him then as he stood by the open window wiping his brow after the labour of forcing the trapdoor, for the air at the upper end of the passage was still close despite the breeze which had swept in from the temples while he had worked in the lower part with the door behind Shiv's image kept open.

No, surely he must have missed something in his search, overlooked some now bricked-up side-tunnel, failed to see some walled-in chamber. The thing must be there, and only a little more work was needed ere he should find it. He turned again to examine the trapdoor, to ascertain exactly how it worked—found the counterpoise which opened it from above, the method of closing it from below. Then once more gathering up his tools, he re-entered the passage, closed the stone above him, and retraced his steps inwards, again sounding the walls from time to time as he went, wherever the least flaws showed in the masonry, wherever it appeared that the stonework was not continuous, that there were the least variations in the bonding of the tile-like bricks or coarse-hewn stones.

The passage was uneven in its course, sometimes rising, sometimes dipping, although, on the whole, it trended steadily downwards. At one point, about two-thirds of the way towards the temple entrance, it dipped for twenty yards or so, then rose again to the same level, so that the continuation was invisible to Taylor standing on the upper side. Here, as at several other points in its course, was a rough-carved image on the left-hand

wall as one faced towards the lower entrance, crude replica of the great idol outside. The existence of several such images in the passage pointed to its having been in some way connected with the temples: possibly the priests had used it as a secret entrance, possibly it was one of the means which enabled shrinking worshippers during the night-watches, suppliants seeking boons, childless women praying for gift of children, to hear, or imagine they heard, the voice of the god granting their petitions.

Taylor had examined each of these images with the utmost care, studied the walls behind and about them, sounded the masonry, but invariably the dead echoes showed that nothing lay behind save the solid earth or the virgin rock. This particular one in the double dip of the passage had at first attracted his attention more than the others, and he had jumped holes about it with the crowbar, hoping to find something behind or below. But the labour of several nights had finally convinced him that the ground behind the surrounding masonry was as solid as elsewhere, and that whatever the reason for the image, it had no connection with any hidden chamber.

He examined it again to-night, and for the first time during his months of work the thing became to him something more than dead rock, and its bizarre carving, its impassive face, its multiple arms each with their own emblem of power, seemed inimical and menacing to the man looking at it in the uncertain light of the lantern. He cursed himself for being a fool to let such ideas come over him, for yielding to such fancies; but as he went on down the passage—try as he would—he could not but help feeling that the thing was something more than dead rock, something living, in some way connected with the past, with the tragedies it had doubtless witnessed, and more, something definitely unfriendly to himself. Undoubtedly, thought he, as he finally emerged into the temple under the shadow of the great image, his nerves were beginning to suffer from the

strain and the frequent lack of sleep, from the long solitary hours underground, the single-handed work in the crumbling passages. It was time he took a rest, even though money would not last for ever and must be carefully husbanded.

And as he walked to his tents, now pitched near to the temples, the delights of civilisation, or such civilisation as India can boast, came up in his mind. Why not drop work for a couple of weeks and go down to Bombay or Madras for a while, have a taste of cheap editions of all those pleasures that he hoped would be his in reality instead of in tawdry imitation when he had found the treasure? And as he turned in for a sleep before dawn he visualised certain attractive scenes and places where, given a little gold, a man might for a space forget the original first commandment anent earning one's bread in the sweat of one's brow, might live as had doubtless lived the men who once held this fort,—some one to minister to their every need, rustle of silk and heavy smell of flowers, scent and fragrance, and fulfilment of all the desires that the tropic night evokes. And as he slept there passed through his mind visions of all these things, and the visions were not those vague ones that sometimes trouble the mind of youth or allure it aside for a moment ere better things—the love of horse and gun and hound, the joy of clean companionship of woman—pull them straight again. His were the visions of the unscrupulous man who has knocked much about the world, and come to regard the unsavoury highly-spiced fleshpots of the big cities—of the coastwise towns—as the quintessence of delight.

Three days later, with his tents and kit in two pony ekkas behind him, a dusty tonga decanted him at Toka Road railway station, thirty-five miles away. Followed a restless night in the tiny stuffy waiting-room, such sleep as he got broken at intervals by the shrill chatter of waiting passengers, for at stations like Toka Road the East does not affect even that semblance of punctu-

ality that it mimics in the big ports, and if you are late for to-day's train, well, isn't there another to-morrow?

Early the next morning, making his way through the crowd of jostling cotton-clothed peasants with big loose turbans, women with gaudy saris who stared at the not-often-seen vision of a white man, swarthy, wrinkled, aboriginal forest-dwellers, he climbed into the stuffy sun-blistered rickety carriage of the slow train which connected, or might connect some time that night, with the cross-India mail, having said good-bye to Taragurh for a fortnight at least.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SHADOWS LIFT.

PAUL lay in bed in the little hospital at Tank, the wire-netted doors wide open to the clear cold sunlight of a Derajat morning, Waziristan left behind for the moment like some evil dream. And yet not altogether evil, he reflected, as the peace of his new surroundings worked upon his tired mind, and the calm that follows strain let his thoughts balance more evenly, allowed him to focus things better, get a fairer perspective of life as a whole, of his own life, and of what the past months really meant.

The long road of jolting camel-stretcher, of crawling convoy and piqueted heights, of ambulance pony and slow hand-borne dooly, lay behind him, and the border hills of Waziristan, the gates up which he had passed to a land of ice and fire, of gaunt hills and wind-swept passes, of high tribal towers and little fruit-orchards, lay—though he could not see them from his room—fifteen miles away over the stony Manzai plain. And at the farther extremity of that the mud fort of Khirgi faced the frowning Hinis defile leading to Jandola fort, and thence up past Palosina, Kotkai, Sorarogha, right into the heart of Mahsudland to the wooded heights above Kaniguram under the snows of Pir Ghal, or to the long fertile Makin valley and the pine-clad mountains about Razmak.

The sudden call for action a week ago had driven out the blackness that had previously obsessed him, and in the reaction that had followed as he lay awake at

night where Smithers fought for breath and life, white-faced and uncomplaining, somehow things had seemed lighter, the dawn not so far away, the shadows not so deep.

To begin with, he now had the prospect, nay, certainty, of seeing Stella before long, since they were bound to give him leave, even if it were only for a couple of months. The doctor had just left him after dressing his wounds, wounds which showed every sign of healing up cleanly too. But he had made no bones about Paul's getting back.

"You won't run up a hill again for three months at least, Major; probably longer. You can count yourself out of Wazzerland for the next four, anyway. Wish I was you! How long are you going to be here? That's for you to say. We'll push you on to India as soon as we can, and with luck that leg ought to stick up in another ten days. The arm'll probably take longer, since it's a long open tear, and the other's a clean in-and-out."

And once with Stella again he might be able to see things more clearly, help her to see them more clearly too. And yet somehow now he had lost that intense desire to see her forgo her ideals, to sacrifice things she clung to merely for his sake, that overpowering craving to make her his for all time which had wrought so upon his mind these last two months. He wanted her now, wanted her as much as ever, but in a different way. Wanted her as he had wanted her at Quetta, just to be with her, to know her near, to talk to her every day, and every hour of the day, to revel in her companionship, in just seeing her and listening to her voice. It was a far less material, far less primitive, desire now as he lay there temporarily crippled, more the want that had characterised those unforgettable days at Quetta, when merely to keep the sunlight in Stella's grey eyes had seemed enough for a life's ambition.

The little voices of doubt that had tortured him so much were silent at present, the black depths gone for

the moment. No longer did he reflect on the shortness of life, the wasting of the years rise up before his mind, the futility of Stella's arguments leer at him as they had done so often.

Now he was content again to wait, to see what time would bring, to leave things to Fate or to Fate's Master, for surely Fate must have a Master. A week ago he had not thought to meet Stella again for nearly a year, but now another month would see them together, event all unexpected, sudden open-handed gift of Fate.

Just at a moment too when things seemed at their blackest, when it appeared as if nothing short of a miracle could straighten out the tangle. And with that thought came back to Paul something of his old belief that things are controlled, that life has a purpose, that Fate is nowise blind, only infinitely subtle in every action, wiser far than we who chafe at an uncomprehended plan which unfolds only inch by inch before our short-sighted eyes.

And with the peace of sickness came back something also of his earlier ideals, submerged of late in the black torrent of unfulfilled craving which had dwarfed every other side of his nature, veiled temporarily by the revulsion of feeling against the Being who had, it seemed, so deliberately let him find what he had sought so long unknown and then snatched it from him.

His old ideas of playing the game returned, the attitude of mind which had always characterised his dealings with women, growth of years from a seed dropped by a sentence read in just that first flush of youth when ideals may become so much or may vanish for all time. "A man's first duty to a woman is to protect her from all things, and most of all from himself, and herself."

"To protect her from herself." That meant what? To prevent her giving up her ideals, from doing things she might regret later; to make sure that if Stella came round to his views it was only because she was convinced of their logic, not merely because the scales were

weighted against her by the knowledge of his want for her, and in lesser measure by her want for him.

And as he re-read her letters now in the quiet of this sunbathed room, with the bowls of winter flowers, the cretonne curtains, the nameless something all about it that spoke of the presence of women's hands, as he re-read them with clearer eyes—eyes and mind the more clear-visioned for closer contact with recent death,—he could see now that the strain had not been all on his side, could visualise something of the struggle she had been going through, could picture the conflict as Stella of the ideals fought against her own heart for the sake of a vision glimpsed at the end of a dusty road.

"Can't you understand me, Paul? Don't you realise that I'd give you the whole of me to-morrow if I could? But I can't, because if I said I'd marry you I wouldn't be giving you the whole of me, only part of me, and that the least part. You say you want me body and mind and soul. But if I say 'Yes' now, then you wouldn't get my soul. For that's made up of my ideals, of my struggles to cling to the things I think we're meant to cling to. And if I let them go, then there wouldn't be any soul to give you—will there?—since it will have vanished with the lost ideals.

"It breaks my heart to read how you are suffering, to think of all you're going through for want of me, and to know that it is all in my hands. But, Paul, won't you have faith a little longer, hang on and hope a little more, so that when the road does lead us out together into the sunshine, there won't be any ugly shadows left to spoil our happiness, shadows which *we* have made and so will never go?"

Yes, it was true. He wanted Stella, body and mind and soul, but now once again he wanted her—soul and mind and body, wanted her grey eyes more than her lips, wanted Stella of the "thinks" more than Stella of the slim graceful figure, wanted the real Stella more than the outward one. And Stella without the ideals wouldn't be Stella at all, since they were by far the

greater part of her, the finer part, the part he had come to love first of all, the vision he had glimpsed first at Aden and on the boat, seen more clearly day by day in Carlos' house, grasped so vividly under those far-off blue-shadowed Baluch hills.

No ; he wanted Stella complete, every single bit of her as he had come to know her, not as of late he had so often felt that he wanted her, without those hateful ideals, those absurd "thinks" that seemed only made to torture him, those fantastic thoughts that only recently had seemed to him could not be products of love at all, could not possibly exist where love existed, and which hence proved that love for him had no place in Stella's mind.

He was prepared again to wait for Stella, to wait down the long years if need be, so that at the end he might have her all herself, unchanged in the least little detail from the woman who had come to mean the whole of life to him. After all, even a lifetime was not very long if at the end of it you could be sure ; and Paul was sure again now of that fact, upon which the whole of his philosophy of life was based, that life is only a bit of eternity, that to-day and to-morrow are only links of the same chain. What it was like beyond he neither knew nor cared, but that a beyond there was he was sure, and in that beyond at least he would have Stella for all time—Stella all complete with the sunlight in her eyes, unshadowed by any action of his.

And so, as sometimes happens to men who have been through darkness and strain and then come into sudden peace of body, Paul came back into peace of mind—peace of mind that was content to wait, to possess itself in patience for the sake of certain happiness some day, happiness beyond all telling, the sudden peace of mind that seems secure for ever, and yet, as experience teaches us so painfully, vanishes again so quickly when the normal comes back once more, and feelings temporarily out of sight spring up again as clamorous and as unruly as ever. But also peace of mind which by degrees shows

us that whatever darkness may descend again light will once more surely follow, until in the fulness of time we learn to face bravely the darkest night, since other nights as black have been followed invariably by dawns of brightest gold.

But that lesson he had yet to learn. For the present he had but mastered the first part, and in his new-found peace no thought of recurring blackness disturbed him. Stella and he would face the long road, eyes always on the far snows above the valleys of delight, without faltering until they came to the end. And so he lay there all content, reading again Stella's letters, with the sunshine falling on the trellised verandah, and the scent of winter flowers from the lawn outside borne in by the fresh cool breeze.

And when the pleasant-faced nursing sister came in to see that his lunch was all right and prop him up with a pillow under his bad arm, she marvelled at the new cheerfulness of her patient, who had looked so worn and strained two days before when the Ford ambulance had decanted him at the doors of the little hospital, and put it down to the letter in the clear-cut feminine writing she had handed him that morning.

A week later much bustle in the ward, which Paul had hitherto occupied alone, announced the impending arrival of Smithers, who had just emerged from the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and spent most of his time dozing, as do men who have pulled through by the skin of their teeth. They brought him in on a stretcher, gaunt of face and feeble of voice, but he grinned at Paul sitting up in bed with his arm in a sling.

"Spot of leave in view, Major! What price the summer at home? And a punt on a river!"

"Not for me," said Paul. "Three months in India is about my ticket."

"I always was lucky," responded Smithers complacently.

"Talking of luck, Diwan Ali's pretty lucky," said

Paul. "Bang through the middle last time, missing everything that mattered, and now again slap through his thigh without touching either bone or artery."

"Is he down here yet?" asked Smithers.

"Yes; came down in the same convoy as me, and my servant, who saw him in the hospital yesterday, says he's sitting up cheery as anything. He's a stout fellow, Diwan Ali. Did you well that day too the way he went on handling his platoon after the jemadar got knocked out. The C.O.'s given him his third stripe now in place of Fathe Khan. He'll get a commission before the year's out at the rate he's going."

"He's worth it every time. The man's a natural leader." Smithers went on with a résumé of Diwan Ali's qualities, until the sister, coming in, threatened to send him out to a room by himself if he couldn't keep quiet and give his lung a chance.

"Camarade, sister," said Smithers the irrepressible, holding up a wasted arm.

The girl settled his pillows again, and just as she was about to go out remembered something, and handed Paul a couple of letters. He tackled Monocloid's first, the rather scrawling handwriting and the jerky staccato sentences telling him of Monocloid's researches and of his plans for his leave to be spent at Taragurh.

"Come along as soon as they let you out of hospital. I've got the whole of the record decoded now. Old Rivecourt was some nut, and no mistake. Wonder how long it took him to work out his code. Took me three bally months to get to the bottom of it, but I've got it now. I'm taking two yakhdans for the giddy boodle, and Sayyid Ali, with a couple of shovels and a pickaxe or three. I think we ought to spot it pretty quick from the directions Rivecourt left, plus the bits of jade. Saw Mrs Nash yesterday, looking bright and bonny. Sent you salaams when I said I was writing. I told her a bit of what I'd found out, and she's full of enthusiasm. We shall probably see her and the Carlos

down there, as their block is only about twelve miles from Taragurh.

"First move is Toka, some twenty-five miles from the fort. I get there on the 26th January, and if you can push off in time meet me there. Funny little dead-alive hole from all reports. Three-quarters deserted cantonment now occupied by one regiment, and a large native city about three miles off. Had a cousin there one time for a bit, and wrote and asked him about the place. He gave me quite a lot of details about Taragurh. Seems a lonesome spot, where no one ever goes if they can help it. He's keen on mouldering ruins, and went there to explore, but I don't suppose we shall see a soul the whole time.

"The place doesn't seem to have been written up much, and I couldn't get any sort of book worth talking of, except the babu product that mentioned the Tower of Victory. But the cousin says it's full of tumble-down ruins, bits of palaces and what not. Didn't seem to have heard of anything like Dideh-i-Badshah, but sent a rough map which he's made, showing what he considered used to be the boss-man's quarters in Moghul days. Don't know how he worked it out, but it seems to lie due east from the tower, which is what I expected. I've done some high art astronomical calculations of late, almost as hair-splitting products as the pay babu works out on my claims for horse allowance."

Stella's letter gave details of the Carlos' proposed trip, and talked of the time they would have together if he could only get down on leave, a certainty now. With the assured prospect of meeting again, both had mutually dropped the discussions that had taken up so much of their earlier letters, since in less than a month they would be able to talk of things together, talk that was worth more than all the letters in the world.

A few more days saw Paul limping round the little garden, or sitting under the trees, his leg propped on a camp-stool, sucking a pipe and thinking of the days of

content when he and Stella would be once more together, or chatting with people who dropped in to see him as they passed up and down the line.

On one such restful day a well-known figure came limping in, loose khaki shirt over baggy trousers, chaplis on well-shaped bare feet, bobbed black locks as carefully tended as ever above the well-shaped features, flash of white teeth, and smart salute.

"Hulloa, Diwan Ali," said Paul in Hindustani. "You're quicker than me. How's the leg?"

"Quite healed," replied the man. "And the sahib's arm? and shin?"

"Leg's all right now, but stiff. My arm's a bit raw still." He passed the man a cigarette from the box on the little table beside him, and motioned him to sit down.

"What are you going to do now, sahib?" asked Diwan Ali as he squatted slowly and lit the cigarette, the big silver seal ring on his fine-cut hand catching the sunlight as he raised the cigarette to his lips.

"Leave," said Paul. "Leave with Brown sahib in Central India."

"Shikar?" queried Diwan Ali.

"Yes, shikar of a sort," said Paul, wondering as he spoke what the shikar would really be. Was it tiger, or treasure, or Stella and happiness? Then he continued, "And you? Will you take the leave the doctors give you this time?" The last time he had been hit Diwan Ali had flatly refused to go on leave, and made himself such a nuisance hanging round the doctor's quarters that the latter had finally yielded and sent him back up the line.

"There may be a vacancy for a Jemadari soon."

"All the more reason to get fit first," replied Paul. "You can't run yet anyway, and you're no use till you can."

"Where are you going with Brown sahib for shikar in Central India? Jubbulpore?" The regiment had gone there for three months on coming back from Pales-

time after the Armistice. "There is good shooting there, and all the sahibs like it."

"Not this time," replied Paul. "We're going to quite a little place in the jungles. An old cantonment called Toka."

"Toka!" put in Diwan Ali quickly.

"Yes, Toka. Why, have you ever been there?"

"No, sahib. I've never been there." He looked at Paul doubtfully, then continued, "If the doctor sahib gives me some leave, will you take me with you for the shikar?"

"Yes, certainly, if you like. But why? Why don't you go back to your own people?"

"I want to see Toka. I've never been there, and once upon a time—before there was any British Raj in Central India—my folk were down that way."

"But you're Punjabis. What were your people doing there?"

"What was Akbar Badshah doing in Hind?" said Diwan Ali. "My folk went down there in Aurungzeb's time. They held high place under the emperors, and we were big people. Only when the emperors lost their power my folk went back to the Punjab, and settled on some land we had given us. We once held a fort near Toka, Taragurh. It is written in some old papers we have at home. Only now we are poor and don't talk much of it—outside."

"The devil you did!" said Paul in English. This was interesting—more than interesting. "What were your folk then?"

"The last of my people in those days was the Nawab Badulla, who held Taragurh and Toka from the emperor," said Diwan Ali simply. "But he was killed, and his family were then at Delhi, and his son had no chance of ever getting Taragurh back, so he stayed in the Punjab. And later on his grandson served the Sirkar in the year of the great Mutiny. Does the sahib know Taragurh?"

"No," said Paul thoughtfully. "But Brown sahib wants to go there, and I shall go too. Yes, we'll take you."

I'll talk to the doctor sahib about it to-morrow. What are the old papers you have at home ? ”

“ Only two sanads of the emperors' times. Gifts of land about Taragurh to Badulla's father and to Badulla. But they show that our folk were in the emperor's favour. Why does the sahib ask ? ”

“ I thought they might give something of the history of Taragurh which Brown sahib was telling me about. But there's nothing like that ? ”

“ No, sahib. Only old sanads like one sees in the fort at Delhi, where I went to see all the captured Turkish and Germani cannon.”

“ And what relation are you to the Nawab Badulla ? ”

“ He was my father's grandfather's grandfather, which is old talk.”

“ Talk of old time, but it will interest Brown sahib when we meet him.”

“ Brown sahib is interested in all manner of things, both new and old,” replied Diwan Ali, who had some acquaintanceship with Monocloid. “ But this is a new game, this looking at old forts. Does he bring Sayyid Ali ? ”

“ He does,” said Paul, and then changed the subject, talking of the late fight and of the men who had been hit ; of the Mahsud losses, details of which he had heard since reaching Tank ; of Smithers and the company's good work, until it was time to go in ; and Diwan Ali went back to the Indian hospital at the other end of the rusty wire fence, with its loop-holed posts, that surrounds Tank, last city in the plain on the edge of mediæval raider land.

Paul lay awake some little time that night after Smithers had gone to sleep, the shaded lamp throwing a faint light over his bed and on the book he was making pretence of reading. He was wondering at Diwan Ali's remarks of the afternoon concerning his family's connection with Taragurh. And somehow they brought back to his mind that evening in his great-uncle's study when he had first been given that piece of jade. What

a simple affair life had been then, just living for the day, content with life as it was, seeking nothing. The Paul whom he now looked back upon seemed a very different being to the Paul he had since come to know—a new Paul of feelings that he would never have believed in twelve months ago, would perhaps have ridiculed any one who suggested their mere possibility.

He recalled the change in his grandfather's life and character that, according to his great-uncle, had taken place after he had come into possession of the green stone, and now here was somewhat of the same process going on in himself, for not only had his own character changed—or was developed the more accurate term?—but life itself had altered. He had undoubtedly become a person of an intense ambition, an overpowering aim which had come to fill his whole outlook, every moment of every day.

“Some stimulus as yet lacking,” his great-uncle had said. Well, sure enough, now he had found a stimulus that was never absent, though it seemed one which helped but little in any course of action that he could visualise as practicable for the present. But undoubtedly life was now ten times the thing it had been, and Paul felt that despite the suffering and the past blackness, he would rather be as he was now, have learnt really to feel, to see the heights even at cost of sometimes plumbing the depths, than go back, even if it were possible, to the Paul he had been a year or so ago.

And not only had the possession of that carved amulet somehow coincided with change in thought and outlook, but also with actual material happenings, coincidences that were passing strange. Stella had come into his life, had come to *be* his life, and then, lo! she held just such another fragment of jade. And when he had spoken to her of his piece with the inscription “Moon of Ramzan” upon it, there was hers with the line “The Setting Sun.” The Moon of Ramzan, the

wishing moon. And ever since then the first glimpse of the new moon—

“Hung aloft in the sky’s deep vault of blue,
A sickle thin crescent bright,”

brought to him more vividly the thought of Stella.

Then Monocloid and his memories of “Fifi” Carter, his papers, Brown’s apparently imaginative theories that they were soon to test. And now, last of all, Diwan Ali seemed to come into the puzzle. Somehow they were all going to be drawn together, and quite unexpectedly and soon. What did it all mean? Was it some Big Plan beginning to show its design? Past details unnoticed suddenly commencing to link together as more and more of them showed, pointing perhaps to some coherent whole hitherto unrealised.

His great-uncle had been right enough in prophesying that he would start upon a quest, though how on earth could he have guessed the future like that? And what was to be the ending of it all? Was he to find what he now knew so well he sought? Or would the puzzle dissolve again, leaving nothing but fragments of a dream? Like broken pieces of a crystal bowl that when complete form something of wondrous beauty, but shattered remain only treacherous shards to stab and lacerate and pain.

But somehow in his newly-regained peace of mind it seemed to him that perhaps the dream would not vanish, that in some at present unglimped way the puzzle pieces would fit together, that Stella and he would yet find their way to those valleys he had visualised at the end of the long dusty road she had sketched as life.

He blew out the lamp and settled down to sleep—sleep broken somewhat that night by half-caught dreams—dreams of a dusty road, visions of flower-gardens under high snows, Stella’s voice sometimes far, sometimes near at hand, and then dawn of pearl and dappled sky over a hillside fragrant with the scented

coolness of early morning, and musical with the call of awakening life, flash of jewelled birds, and gold of rising sun.

And then, later, real dawn of hospital ward and morning tea, chill winter sunlight, and reality of life in place of dreams.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE DUSTY ROAD.

STELLA was busy packing in her room at the Carlos', the bed littered with piles of clothes, overflowing trunks open before her, shoes and boots on the floor about her, hats a many in the shelf almirah by the open window that looked out on the long mountain wall crowned by Takatu. In another two days they would be in the south-bound train *en route* for the Toka jungles, in search of tiger, and what to Stella was infinitely more, with every mile drawing her nearer to Paul again, to Paul now in hospital at Tank, Paul with slung arm and limping leg and other women doing for him the hundred little things that a woman loves to do for her man when he is sick.

And he also would be in a south-bound train before many days were out, coming down on three months' leave to stop with Monocloid and the Carlos alternately till their leave was up, and then to return with them to Quetta. And at the thought of their approaching meeting Stella reflected again, as she had done so often of late, on what that meeting would be like; on the long days and weeks to follow; wondered how she could ever let him go again; if her ideals would stand his constant presence; wondered if she would yield to his entreaties; cast overboard those ideals of hers. And as she wondered she longed the more to be free of them, to take the chance of happiness, take the joy that lay ready to her hand, even if the morrow should bring

naught but ashes and Dead Sea fruit, and the rest of her life be partly spoiled by that loss of the inner vision which she had sketched for him at Aden.

And once again, as many a day before, she cast herself into a cosy arm-chair, and with her feet to the fire sat trying to clear her thoughts, to get things balanced, to call up those ideals which had once been so strong, and now seemed so attenuated, so feeble and flimsy, so utterly worthless, and that yet demanded such an infinite price.

Why was she following this line of action, this scheme of denial, this repression of herself that spelt only sorrow for her, and, worse than that, suffering and pain unbelievable for Paul—Paul who had come to be more to her than the whole world beside? What were her reasons for a course which nearly all her friends would stigmatise as quixotic, as mad, as selfish, too, beyond all understanding? She reviewed some of the women she knew who had been placed somewhat as she was—Evelyn Leigh, married to a man she called a beast, but who was heights above what Stella had seen of her husband, now divorced and remarried, apparently absolutely happy with a husband who adored her, with delightful children—Evelyn Leigh who seemed to go through life with nothing but joy and gladness about her.

Then there was Violet Winslow—a war marriage that had turned out badly,—now perfectly content with her second venture, a man to Stella's eyes no preferable to the first, but who somehow seemed to fill up Violet's life, to give her all she asked, to make life something not unlike heaven.

And Stella herself had infinitely better grounds for seeking divorce than ever they had. What was it held her back? Not religion, since she had really none, and the Church whose nominal follower she was admitted it upon occasion, admitted it largely with some restrictions that very few people seemed, however, to take seriously. It was certainly no question of dogma like

that which upheld Dorothy Anderson in her lonely life, Dorothy Anderson of the wastrel husband, last heard of in South America temporarily attached to a Brazilian actress; Dorothy Anderson with her strong religious views, her unswerving fidelity to the teachings of her Church.

But, then, she was a Catholic, and Catholics were different from other people in these matters, generally speaking, at least those who, like Dorothy, took the thing seriously, made it part of their life, however unostentatiously. Stella wondered what it was about the Roman Church that kept its followers so faithful as a rule, even at the cost of sacrifices like Dorothy was making? Certainly not mere emotion, or childlike subservience, or defective intellect. Dorothy, independent of nature, brilliantly clever, keeping herself and her deserted children by her pen, and keeping them well too. Dorothy, who for all that she was capable of more emotion than most people, could be as coldly balanced as a man if occasion demanded. Dorothy, who had refused the man whom Stella was sure she loved, and with brave words upon her lips sent him back to the war—to die.

Stella's thoughts momentarily left the train they had been pursuing as she visualised again the week-ends she had spent with Mrs Anderson in her tasteful little flat, her bedroom as dainty as ever woman could wish, and over her bed a crucifix plain and unadorned, central feature of the attractive room, as it and what it stood for was the central feature of Dorothy's attractive self. She wondered what it was that Dorothy found in her religion which made it so alive to her. Certainly not the personality of the snuffy little priest who preached so badly, and yet somehow kept his church always filled, to the envy of the cultured clergyman across the road with the brilliant Oxford career, who was always complaining of the emptiness of his pews in spite of his excellent music and first-rate choir.

Her recollections of Dorothy's church were of rather tawdry vestments, badly arranged decorations, very poor music, and over-gaudy statues and pictures. And yet an inexplicable something filled the church not only with the poor and ill-educated, but with women as smartly dressed as Dorothy, with men spoken of by their non-Catholic fellows as sound and level-headed, men of business, a rising soldier or two, doctors of big practices and reputations, a Judge of noted acumen; not only filled the church at the conventional British hour of eleven o'clock of a Sunday morning, but turned many of its followers out to Mass on week-days, quite an unofficial voluntary concern apparently, whence they returned again to breakfast and then to their work at law courts, at consulting rooms, at the War Office, in the pulsing heart of the city.

A strange phenomenon she had thought at the time, and puzzled over it awhile, puzzled the more in her talks with Dorothy, or when things seen and heard in the course of her life made her realise the power that this strange Church with the quaint—sometimes childish—ceremonies, the odd customs, had over perfectly normal people, everyday people, average men and women—the power of making them forgo so much, not for vivid ideals like those she had once glimpsed, but from plain, unattractive, dull things called duty and obedience.

But hers was a different case. She was following no course dictated by religious feelings; no sense of religious duty demanded that she should forgo the birthright of every man and woman—love and the possession of the beloved. She was denying herself all that on account of ideals that she had herself built up. And with that reflection her thoughts left the question of Dorothy and religion, and came back again to their original theme, as she tried once again to picture to herself more clearly those ideals that of late had been sometimes so obscured.

She had talked to Paul of the ideal of marriage, of that feeling of hers that the intimacy it spelt could never again be shared with any one if the person with whom it had first grown still lived. And yet hundreds and thousands of people went through the process, and found happiness again, or found it for the first time. That anyway must be a purely personal question, one of taste alone which had no vital bearing on the world at large.

What was marriage apart from its mere relationship between man and woman, its companionship, its help through life? Was it anything more than just a mere individual contract that could be made or broken at will without any subsequent reaction, especially if, as in her case, there was no question of children?

What did it mean to the world at large? What effect had the individual upon the race as a whole? The world was made up of countries, of States, of communities; civilisation stood demarcated from barbarism in just that, in its cohesion of units and sub-units. And what was it all built up upon? Always upon the individual man and woman, upon the union of the two, the family. Destroy that and the rest must fall, just as the earthquake that wrecks the hidden foundations brings down the whole towering edifice above in tumbling ruin.

She was on surer ground here. Destroy the family and you destroy the community, and with it the civilisation built up upon it. And with civilisation goes the demarcation between man and beast, vanishes that ever-progressing gap which to people of Stella's temperament is the surest mark of man's destiny, and the loss of which would render life insufferable.

And human nature is so grasping, so ever ready to make the tiny inch a wide ell, that it would be almost impossible to frame any law that would not inevitably start that disintegrating process which in the end must sweep all before it. Admit divorce for Dorothy Ander-

son, for herself, and shortly you would admit it for Evelyn Leigh. Admit it for Evelyn Leigh, and why not for Violet Winslow? And since people have learnt how to do without children, there opened up a vicious circle. Marriage uncertain in its tenure, and so children had better wait a bit; no children to keep the two together, so why should the marriage be binding?

And thus, with a little clearer brain, she visualised once again just where she came into the picture. The hard case that must yet hold, lest if it break the rest will follow until ruin sweep away the whole in time. Just like Paul in some ways, Paul sitting up in Waziristan, Paul holding the border that others behind in peace might reap the fruits, the lonely man on the skyline on whose doggedness hangs the safety of the troops behind, of the villages behind the troops.

The tired sentry who longs for sleep, but if *he* may sleep, then why not others? and if others, why not all? and if all sleep, what then?

Yes, she had got herself clear again for a moment, seen once more those ideals of playing the game that had of late been so blurred and hazy, understood once more her part, and as yet not realised to the full what sacrifice the part entailed. Got her vision clear once more with logic that was more man than woman, masculine complement of the woman's character that goes to make the complete woman even as the softer feminine qualities go to make the perfect man. But a masculine quality so easily lost, so overlain at times by moods and thoughts and elemental complex feelings arising from woman's function.

But just for the time she had hold of herself again, and Stella of the ideals, grey eyes all unshadowed, even though greater sacrifice loomed up ahead, came up anew above the mists of loneliness and longing that blurred and distorted all her thoughts, eyes fixed as ever on the long road that must lead some day to the dazzling heights beyond.

And anyway, come what might, there would be another space of happiness, another milestone of romance, for Paul's recent letters showed a slackening of the past strain, a more tranquil outlook that might endure a space when with the joy of pure companionship those other feelings might be kept under for a while, and let them just enjoy the bliss of being together once more, as they had been in those glad days before he had left Quetta.

Then, as she rose to continue her packing, she pictured their next meeting, wondered if his arm would still be bandaged, wondered if he would have been anyway changed from when he went away, wondered if he would find any change in her, or whether they would take up life just where it had stopped when the train had borne him out of Quetta station four months ago, and all the sunlight had seemed suddenly to darken as she had turned to follow the Carlos to the waiting car. And as she packed, selecting her things with care, for Carlos had insisted that baggage was to be limited, she wondered which frocks to choose, which Paul would like the best, which ones seemed somehow most connected with days and hours passed with him.

But Marjorie and Carlos, returning from a morning in the bazaar, choosing a Persian rug for a wedding present to Carlos' cousin at home, had quite a different idea of Stella's thoughts as the big car purred up the incline in the winter sunshine.

"Glad Paul's gettin' leave all right," said Carlos, avoiding two mule-carts. "It'll cheer Stella up. She's been lookin' a trifle harassed of late ever since he got hit."

"Before too," replied Marjorie, "though that probably aggravated things. I wonder what effect it will have?"

"How do you mean? What effect?"

"Why, whether it will speed up things a bit now. You never realise how much some one may mean until

you've nearly lost them, do you? I don't think I ever wanted you so much as when you were hit in '17, and we'd been married for years then."

"You mean Paul's having been hit is going to assist the huntin' process?"

"Probably it will. Make her realise what she really does want, for I'm sure she wants him."

"Wants a doormat, and not only a photo, in other words. I wonder if you're right, old thing."

"Sure I am. Not that she's told me anything about it. But she was ironing out a grey frock this morning, one she hasn't worn since he went away."

"What it is to be a woman! Wish I could do the detective stunt like that. I should be Director of Intelligence at the War House in two-twos."

He skilfully avoided Monocloid—doing about forty to the hour, with an absent look in his eyes,—station-bound to book seats in the train, with Sayyid Ali perched on top of a pile of miscellaneous bundles and packages on the back seat.

"Wonderful bird, Monocloid, isn't he?" said Carlos, as he waved to the retreating dust-cloud. "Never know what he's going to do next, do you?"

"Yes, you do," said Marjorie. "Just exactly what no one else would ever think of doing in the same circumstances. What's he coming down to Toka for? He doesn't shoot, does he?"

"Not much that I know of. He's got some mad stunt on for a cert, though what it is I haven't an earthly. But I believe it's mixed up with Stella and Paul, because I've seen him confabbing with Stella of late talking quite seriously. He's got an interest in that piece of jade of hers. Perhaps he's trying to find out its history to write a story about. He has a fluent if erratic pen."

Monocloid does spread himself into print upon occasion, writes very much like he talks—vivid and fanciful,—dashes of imagination flavoured with touches of pungent

common-sense, quick observation of the humorous, and a sense of the semi-comic melodramatic.

"Stella would be rather a good person to put into a story, I must say. She's pretty vivid, and if some one still seems vivid after they've lived with you for a year, they'd be worth picturing."

"He won't be writing her story whatever he writes. His pen doesn't lean to portrayal of the feminine much. Paul might do that, but never Monocloid."

Carlos pulled into the drive of his bungalow, and the noise of the car brought Stella to the door of her room to see who it was.

"Such a topping carpet we've got," called Marjorie, catching sight of her. "Helen will love it; she raves about Persian carpets and saddle-bags, and things like that."

Stella appraised the purchase, listening to Carlos—who rather prides himself upon being a dilettante in the matter—holding forth on the dye, on the number of stitches to the inch, on the numerous other points apparently obvious to the connoisseur, though hidden from the uninitiated.

Tea brought the Paiges, Major Paige full of Paul's handling of the recent action, details heard from Davis, who was a friend of theirs.

And to Stella, listening to the men's talk, half-heard across the babble of Mrs Paige, full of the gossip of Quetta, it was strangely pleasant to hear Paul discussed in this way, to hear him praised by men like Carlos, whose praise was worth having, who knew what work and war really are; men whose highest praise for an action that a war correspondent would make four columns of superlatives out of is just "a good show," "a decent bit of work"; who described what a journalist would call the "valley of the shadow of death," or "a shell-torn inferno," as "rather a sticky place"; men whose praise was worth hearing since they had done things as good themselves.

And she could praise him more than they ever could, could value him for gifts far rarer than "keeping his head in a sticky place," for keeping his hold over himself, for helping a woman to keep her faith where many men would have tried to make her lose it.

But oh ! how it made her want him, made her want again to abandon that same faith in her ideals, give him all he wanted, herself for the rest of his life, give him what surely he had earned, walking alone in the blackness, blackness that she could visualise so well, having passed through it herself. And sitting there listening, once again her thoughts of the morning seemed a little farther off, a little less clear ; the hard case so much crueller, not on her account, but on his.

And that night when she went to bed, she prayed in her incoherent fashion for something to lighten life for him and her ; prayed from the fullness of her heart as she had first prayed when things went wrong in those years before ; prayed to the God she had once ceased even to believe in, to Christ who had walked the road of suffering alone, and known the blackness of despair.

Stella's religion had no very definite form, owed allegiance to no Church now ; like all the rest of her make-up it was product of her own thoughts, "essence of Stella" as she would have put it had she ever tried to put it into words. A vague belief in God, a belief more definite in the God-man Christ as some one more comprehensible to human ideas, some one of infinite compassion and tenderness, of sympathy and understanding, as she visualised Him from the pages of the New Testament, which she read occasionally, from the 'Imitation,' which was one of her bed books, read often uncomprehendingly, but read for the spirit that underlies it, and that called to Stella, even though the religious views of the writer lay far outside her ken.

She picked it up that night and opened it unthinkingly as she often did, to read a few pages before she tried to sleep, and she had read perhaps half a page

mechanically ere her mind focussed itself on what she was reading. Plain and unequivocal, clear and sharp as a guiding rod, words as simple and hard as the words of Him who had been the inspiration of Thomas à Kempis when he wrote the little book that even to-day, after several hundred years, still calls to so many souls, alike to those of his own faith and to those of alien faiths.

“The Cross therefore is always ready, and everywhere awaiteth thee . . .

“If thou carry it unwillingly, thou makest it a burden to thee, and loadest thyself the more, and nevertheless thou must bear it . . .

“If thou fling away one cross without doubt thou wilt find another, and perhaps a heavier . . .

“Let him take up his cross and follow Me . . .”

Stella closed the book and laid it on the table at her bedside. Was that to be always her portion, always that dusty road she had visualised, always the cross in some form or another? Was that the portion of every one in the world, to suffer, to suffer not knowing why?

And she had suffered enough already, suffered in every nerve, suffered herself at the hands of another, suffered the more at her own hands which had made Paul suffer.

And despite her clearer thoughts of the morning, her logical conclusions, her desire to play the game somehow no matter what the cost, as she lay awake in the darkness, the blackness came back to her mind once more as all her being cried out against her unmerited fate, and her human reason clamoured at her, showed her the futility of her ideals, mocked at her resolutions, while flesh and blood chafed and fought against the control she sought to exert; and Stella of the warm lips, of the clamorous feelings athirst for love and motherhood, fought against Stella of the ideals, against the Stella who, with her eyes upon the far heights, plodded along

the dusty road when all around lay gardens of fair content.

And even when morning brought clearer light again, Stella rose to a new day with a feeling of weariness and the aftermath of blackness clinging to her, and deep in her soul the stirrings of the half-welcomed, half-dreaded feeling telling her that she could not hold on alone like this for ever.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE TRAIL.

PAUL and Monocloid sat at the table of the old Dak bungalow in Toka cantonment, in the light of a somewhat feeble oil-lamp, studying a rough sketch of Monocloid's production showing the fort at Taragurh. Paul was, as usual, sucking at his pipe while he bent over the map or sat back listening to Brown's theories, while Monocloid, a non-smoker, helped himself periodically from a bottle of sweets. Around them in the bare room were heaped-up bundles and packages, one of Monocloid's battered mule-trunks, yakhdans and gun-cases, tents and camp furniture done up in sacking. Their possessions announced them to the world as being undoubtedly what, for lack of a better label, they described themselves to such of their friends or acquaintances as they had run into in this rather deserted corner of India—shikaris bent on big game.

Paul, more or less sound again though still somewhat stiff of arm and game of leg, had arrived by the afternoon train, and Monocloid, after two days spent in Taragurh, had come back to meet him on his arrival, having left Sayyid Ali at Taragurh in charge of his tents and stores.

"Yes, I've got the hang of the old place all right now," said Paul. "The thing I want to hear is what you think we ought to look for."

Monocloid, after days and weeks of incessant work, had at last got the record out in clear, discovered all that Taylor—unknown to them—had ascertained from the old papers, and one or two more items, one of which

—a rough note added later than the original, and for some reason not copied by Fifi Carter on the duplicates which he had made to take with him on service in 1914 —was to prove later of inestimable value to them. Neither, of course, had any idea that there was another searcher in the field, for Taylor's stay among the flesh-pots of civilisation had prolonged itself; and further, they had no knowledge of Carter's second copies of the record, while to the best of their belief his piece of jade lay with him in a forgotten grave in the heart of the African bush.

Monocloid had read out his translation of the record earlier in the evening, mentioning the piece of jade which Gopal Tiwari had hidden under the old idol, and which, with the two pieces they already had, should give them the clue. He had located the Tower of Victory at once, of course, while, thanks to his cousin's theories and notes, he had found a small window with carven balcony, which, as far as could be ascertained, must have been one of the apartments of the old rulers of Taragurh, and which might very well have been used by them as a place from whence to review their troops or show themselves to their people.

"Just like the Badshahi nazar in the fort at Delhi," went on Monocloid. "Nice window-seating and all. And it looks out towards the Tower of Victory, which is just what you'd expect. From it you'd see the setting sun and the new moon more or less in line with the Tower. I fancy the third piece, when we've found it, will have some other landmark on, and then all we've got to do is to plot the three, and dig until we find Rivecourt's passage."

"Did you go and have a hunt for Gopal Tiwari's piece in the temples?" queried Paul.

"No. Saved that up for you. That'll be our first bit of work when we get there to-morrow. The line lies across some old ruins of what was evidently a summer-house place. Probably the spot where the Nawab used to spend his lighter moments with the dark-eyed damsels

he collected from the surrounding countryside. But the whole bally place seems chock-full of passages and taikhanas. Sayyid Ali thinks it's a great game hunting round and dodging snakes and waiting for the roof to tumble on your head. Bit wobbly in parts, though. I'm glad you've brought Diwan Ali along. The pair of them will come in handy to dig us out if we get into trouble."

"Is there any one there?"

"Not a blinking soul. It's absolutely deserted; not even the usual Goojar village among the ruins. I talked to one or two funny aborigines, and apparently there's a curse on the place according to them. I expect the first cheery Moghuls who got there made a tidy mess of it, and the local gentry got scared. I can imagine a few hundred bright Pathan lads with a handful or two of lusty youths from Farghana would have painted it average pink when they took it. Guess there was a bit of squeaking from the local Bannias when they got busy with the spear-points."

"I suppose it's a bit off the road for globe-trotters, and not sufficiently on the picture-postcards for the people who do India in three weeks preparatory to writing books about its problems."

"Trifle woolly like and off the beat. That class want a hotel with hot and cold laid on, golf course, and electric light. There was a bloke there though, it seems, not so long ago. According to the local villagers he was an artist; used to spend all his time making pictures. But he went off at the end of last month, so we ought to have the place to ourselves."

"How far off are the Carlos?" Paul had come straight down from Tank to Toka to meet Monocloid, but once he had seen Taragurh he proposed to leave such kit as he didn't want and go straight over to the Carlos' camp.

"About twelve miles away. Very busy with machans and buffaloes, Carlos covering miles of ground every day with a Dravidian monkey of a shikari, who spins

him lies about tiger. We'll get 'em over one day when we've got the blinkin' treasure-house opened. Have a private show of the crown jewels before we pack 'em up."

"If we ever find the things. Perhaps there aren't any, or perhaps they've been collected by some one else years ago. Anyway, it'll be amusing even if there's nothing there, and I like pottering around old places like that. There's always something to see and something to think about. Did you get hold of any history of the place?"

"Not much. The gazetteer had something about it, and I made some notes from that. Did you get anything out of Diwan Ali? 'Straordinary show, his being connected with the place."

"No, he didn't seem to know much about it. But by the same token I suppose you've realised that if we do find anything it will presumably belong to him as the direct heir."

"M'yes. If we can diddle the Simla Babus out of it. They'll probably try and hang on to it with the object of reducing the army budget next year if they can. However, that part's a long way off. We've got to get hold of it first. By the way, seen my patent gim for plotting two bearings at once?" He reached for the haversack on the chair behind him, and Monocloid-like spent the rest of the evening—all thoughts of Tara-gurh and the treasure hunt far from his mind—in expounding the wonders of his new invention.

Finally, Paul insisted on bed, and retired there, Monocloid still sunk in a long chair, peering through his eyeglass at the metal-and-wood contraption he had evolved before leaving Quetta, until his mind went off at still another tangent, and he buried himself in a book of ethnology. And there he stayed for another hour, while Paul settled down in the rather stuffy room, where his bearer had laid out his bedding on the nawar bedstead.

Another day nearer to Stella, whom soon he would be meeting again, when there would be no more need for letters when he could talk to her again, look into her

grey eyes and hear her voice, tell her of all he had been through and of how the blackness that had haunted him had gone away again now, comfort her after what she had suffered of late, for of her suffering her letters left no doubt; and Paul was unselfish enough to be able to see it, and now that his own black mood had passed to wish for nothing better than to help her.

Another man in his place might easily have felt that it was fair that she should suffer; that since she had made him suffer, had let him get to love her when she was not prepared to give him all he asked, she deserved to suffer. But the normal Paul that had emerged again from the dark veils was not so made. To him in his better moods the only thing that mattered was Stella's happiness, and to ensure that he felt he would endure anything, endure even all that her refusal cost him, endure and wait in the hope that some day things would all come right. No longer was there any desire to reproach her for what she had made him go through, that had all gone when peace came back to his mind in Tank hospital, and he had found himself once more.

Just now he only asked one thing—to be with her, to make life easier, to lighten things for her, and in doing that to find his own reward, the companionship of the woman he loved more than any one else, just now even more than himself.

And so he fell asleep, visualising Stella as he would see her before another week had passed, with frock of grey in the sunlight in Carlos' camp, and the shadows which must have darkened her eyes of late would surely go in the long joyous days, the quiet evenings in the moonlight, the dawn walks in the freshness of the jungles.

He awoke from a dreamless sleep to find Monocloid already up watching Diwan Ali packing Paul's kit on to an ekka, while the bearer was busy getting breakfast ready in the first light of dawn, and the low-wheeled two-pony tonga that was to take them along the forest

road to Taragurh waiting in the overgrown compound of the bungalow. An hour later saw them passing out of the straggling cantonments, old wide bungalows under dense masses of century-old trees, banian with thick nets of falling roots about them, peepals and neem and clumps of bamboo, little odd paint-daubed whitewashed roadside shrines scattered with handfuls of faded petals, garlanded with chains of pink and white and yellow flowers.

Away to their right on the open maidan a company of the local regiment were drilling, and, mingled with the swift call of the darting green parrots among the tree-tops, came the far-off sound of bugles.

Ahead the road, after passing through fields for a space, wound its way into the thick jungles, above which, faint against the horizon, showed blue hills outlined against the cloudless sky.

The dawn air was fresh and cool on this cold weather morning, and Paul was glad to pull his coat about him as he jolted along, occasionally talking with Monocloid, to the soothing accompaniment of jolting tonga bar and the clatter of the ponies' hoofs on the dusty road, where the little striped grey squirrels darted to cover in the trees with sudden chirps of alarm. A very pleasing change to the gaunt bareness and biting cold of a Waziristan winter, with the ice-pools in the river-bed, and a dry freezing wind sweeping down the nullahs as sharp and whiplike as a Mahsud bullet.

"What time do we get there?" he asked, waking Monocloid from a doze where he sat huddled in the corner of the other back seat, bare knees and short-sleeved khaki-shirt open at the throat. Heat and cold alike have little effect on him, for his clothing never seems to vary.

"Twelve thirty-ish at the foot of the hill, and if Sayyid Ali has the sense to have some coolies ready for the kit we'll be up on top shortly after one."

"What's the programme then?"

"Bit of lunch and a look around, and then we'll

make tracks for the caves and see if we can find old Gopal's chunk of jade."

For five hours they wound along the jungle road, passing only a few villagers bound for civilisation as represented by Toka for the purchase of the simple necessities which their villages did not produce, necessities that only a few short years ago were esteemed luxuries. Cotton cloth of Manchester for saris and turbans, kerosine oil and matches, possibly a pound or two of coarse country gunpowder. Once they passed an old wizened man with stick-like stringy arms and legs and a monstrous growth upon his back going in to the hospital at Toka cantonment, having at last yielded to the frequent entreaties of the regimental doctor—a slayer of tiger and sambhur,—who had gained the confidence of the country-side.

Taragurh's frowning hill loomed ever nearer and nearer, until Paul, turning round, could make out the dim outline of ruined wall under the white needle of the Tower of Victory which stabbed the sky above, see the winding path leading up the precipitous rock-sides, catch his first glimpse of the great arch of the Khuni Darwaza.

Then the tonga turned off the main road, bumping along a rough track for a couple of miles, and finally pulled up at the bottom of the cliff which towered a thousand feet above them, pulled up in response to the hails of Sayyid Ali in shirt and shorts and chaplis, waiting with half a dozen little black forest-dwellers to take up the baggage when Diwan Ali in the ekka some miles behind should arrive.

Monocloid awoke as the tonga stopped, readjusted his eyeglass, and greeted Sayyid Ali, who had come forward to undo the suit-cases and bedding-rolls roped on over the mud-guards.

Paul rolled out of the tonga and stretched his legs, stiff after the long drive, lit a cigarette, and looked up at the cliff above.

"Some site for a fort. Wonder how the devil they made that road up? Must have taken months and

months to hack that out. All by hand probably, with no explosives. They seem to have scarped the face too in places. Pierre Rivecourt's friends must have been an energetic crowd if they did that."

"Ages before them," replied Monocloid as he got out. "Old Hindu, I should say. Probably much the same time as the temples, and they were made in about the year one. They're on the other side about half-way down the hill. Chock-full of weird carving and squint-eyed idols. The cheery Cis-Indus crowd who took the place seem to have amused themselves having cockshies at 'em with half-bricks, judging by their features. Hi! oh, father of monkeys! don't carry that tiffin basket upside down!"

The last remark in the vernacular to a stalwart sheepish-looking long-haired Gond youth—whose wardrobe seemed to consist of little save a short sheet worn kiltwise, and a yard of red cloth twisted into his greasy locks—brought Sayyid Ali to the attack, fluent with all the contempt which Northern India cherishes for the southern half of the continent. The biting Punjabi sarcasm doubtless didn't penetrate very far, but look and gesture and feeling saved the tiffin basket from cascading its more liquid contents over the greasy locks.

Then, leaving Sayyid Ali to wait for the arrival of the ekka with the rest of the kit, Paul and Monocloid, with Paul's servant and three or four coolies, followed the winding path up the hill, the view over far-flung jungle and distant hill growing with every foot they climbed, until they reached the ruined wall which had once formed a curtain to the Khuni Darwaza, giant blocks of sandstone. Then turning a double corner, flanked with loophole and matchlock galleries, they passed in under the carven wonder of the gateway, of whose importance in their quest they were all unaware; and crossing the ruined courts and fallen buildings, all shimmering in the hot sunlight, made their way to where Monocloid's tents were pitched in the shadow of an old pipal-tree hard by the Tower of Victory. Neither

Sayyid Ali nor Monocloid's Punjabi servant had any objection to living in the fort, and even had they gleaned the stories current in the countryside, after a few years of war and wandering with Monocloid their hardened nerves would not have worried them at the possible existence of a ghost or two.

Paul sat down in the camp-chair outside Monocloid's tent and mopped his brow, for after the last year at Quetta, the winter in Waziristan, and finally a month in hospital in Tank in the middle of the cold weather, Taragurh, with the sun radiating from rock and stone, struck him as distinctly warm; and when Monocloid's servant hurried to greet him he was glad enough of a drink from the bottles in the straw-filled basket, periodically drenched with water, which swung from a branch of the big pipal-tree.

It certainly looked a fascinating place, with its old ruins, its tumbled overgrown walls, its paved courts, now with grass growing everywhere, that perfect tower vivid in the white sunlight against the blue sky beyond. And as he looked at it his mind went back to that evening in Monocloid's room at Quetta when he had dreamed. The thing was absurdly like what he had seen then—fluted walls and little balustrades outside the narrow windows, carved inscriptions, scroll-work of flowing Arabic letters.

He must certainly bring Stella here; she would love to see the fort, just the sort of a place that would bring her thoughts to the surface, call up the subconscious Stella, seeing things behind the obvious, picturing visions and dreams, quick with little apt remarks about the imagination that the scene would conjure up. And by moonlight the place would be really wonderful.

Monocloid's shout for lunch brought his thoughts back to the present, and after the meal Brown pulled out his papers and showed Paul the various points he had identified, tramping backwards and forwards in the hot afternoon sunlight, until Paul, still stiff of leg where he had been hit, was glad to call a halt for a cup of tea

ere they set forth to visit the rock temples nearly four hundred feet below.

Then they started down the steep hillside by a little winding path of the narrowest, snaking between tumbled boulders and clumps of bushes, the Tana river glinting in the sunlight among the thick blue-green masses of the jungle below.

"Man Friday," laughed Paul, as he pointed to where in the shadow of a rock was the print of an unmistakable European boot, imprinted in what had been mud of a chance shower a month ago, now dry and hard and wind-worn at the edges. "Your artist friend, I suppose, since you and Sayyid Ali always wear chaplis, and no one else comes here."

But somehow, despite his laugh, the thing jarred in this atmosphere of old time, this forgotten fortress which he had begun to visualise as his and Stella's, with only chapli-shod Monocloid and his following and Carlos, who always wore rope-soles when shooting, as a pleasant rather hazy background. He wondered where the artist was now, who he was, and what pictures he had made of the old ruins.

"Probably," said Monocloid incuriously. "Look, there are the temples." And for once in a way there was a gleam of enthusiasm in his eyes as he gazed down the hillside to where below them the dark shadows and the great carved rocks pointed the entrance to the caves.

Another ten minutes and they stood in the entrance, the gloom in front accentuated by the vivid sunlight without.

"It's magnificent carving," said Paul as he examined a figure on the rock. "What awful vandals your Cis-Indus pals were, the way they broke up these places. That carving must have taken years and years of hand-work."

And it was true, for even now, defaced and mutilated, the figure he studied showed every sign of real art, even though the carving was perhaps a little heavy, a little

overdone in its wealth of detail, of drapery and jewel, of bracelet and anklet. The faceless figure stood out upon the rock, the undamaged limbs still seeming instinct with life, perhaps the very life of the long-forgotten craftsman who, centuries before, had put his finest handiwork into this representation of his god.

"May be vandals, but they're alive," retorted Monocloid. "D—— good thing to break up something now and then in this country. Otherwise they become unbreakable. Like the blokes what sit on the hilltops and think they're India because they've been there so long. Get quite hurt if you suggest they might be scrapped."

Paul hurriedly changed the subject, and brought Monocloid back to the story of the jade.

"Where's the thing hidden?" he asked as they made their way through the temple courts.

"Under the biggest statue in the place. Shiv, with arms like a bundle of snakes. They don't seem to have broken him up, which is perhaps as lucky, since, according to Rivecourt, the carving gives us the key to the hiding-place. There it is," and he pointed to the end of the temple, where Paul saw the gigantic idol rising before him.

They stood there a space studying the image, Monocloid busy with notes on a scrap of paper he had taken from his pocket working out which were the points referred to by the old Frenchman; Paul wondering at the carving, at the lifelike quality of the work, pondering on what its history must have been, on the scenes it must have watched, calling up the imagined past with that uncanny power of his to visualise things, to glimpse the future, to recreate the dead past, that gift of his which had made Stella, half in laughter and half in love, call him "Dreamer of Dreams" on a Quetta hillside months before.

"And by pressing upon the head of the figure under the right foot, pressing inwards and sideways all at once, the sliding block moves backwards, revealing a cavity in which, according to Gopal Tiwari, the third

piece lies hidden,' ” said Monocloid, reading from his notes. “ Wonder which figure he means ? There are three of the blinkin’ monkey things under the gent’s right beetle-crusher ! ”

Paul looked at the carvings, and, as Monocloid said, there certainly were three of the grimacing human figures under the god’s slim foot. But one of them clearly couldn’t be the figure referred to, since its head was not under the foot at all. With consummate art the carver had rendered the figure as half escaped from the descending foot, writhen away from it, to be caught at the last moment across the loins, the face somehow expressing the frustrated hope, the joy of escape turning to the despairing realisation of failure at the end.

“ Not that one, anyway,” said he, indicating it.

“ Joss, who looks as if he just realised that instead of finding sixpence he’s really lost a bob ? No ; his head isn’t underneath ‘ Snakes ’ foot at all. Must be one of the other two.”

Monocloid leaned forward and pressed upon the head of the middle figure with all his force, but nothing moved. “ Not that cove either.”

Then he turned to the last of the three figures, which, with its arm above its head, seemed trying to ward off the impending terror of the foot. And as he pressed upon it the whole block upon which it was carved slid sideways, revealing, just as Rivecourt had written, a long narrow cavity, into which Monocloid thrust his electric-torch.

“ By Jove, it’s there ! ” said Paul, who somehow up to date had not taken the whole thing seriously ; been somehow unable to focus his mind on this quest of hidden treasure, so fantastic and unreal. “ What’s inside.” He craned over Monocloid’s shoulder as the latter peered into the little dark hole at the base of the statue.

Monocloid withdrew his hand, showing a handful of dust and a mouldering piece of cloth, remnants of the flower-petals and garlands, the once bright scarf in which Gopal Tiwari had wrapped his treasure.

"Blink all!" said he slowly, letting the débris fall to the floor from his open hand. "Somebody else besides Rivecourt knew about this, unless Gopal was stuffing him. But that's not likely. Why should he have told him anything about the hiding-place at all? It's cunning too."

He slid the block back into place, and it fitted without a trace of any opening showing in the masonry, fitted as might fit the most carefully seasoned woodwork. Then he leant upon the squat image once more, and again the cavity opened noiselessly.

"There were only the four of them: Pierre, whom we know all about; Gopal, who was caught the next day and finished; Badulla, who was killed in the fight; Mahmud Hussein? Now what the devil happened to Mahmud Hussein? Pierre's piece is buried with Fifi Carter. Mrs Nash's bit is obviously that of Badulla. Remains Gopal's chunk, which was hidden here, and Mahmud Hussein's. Yours might be either of them."

Monocloid sat down on a carved elephant near by and whistled to himself, thinking hard.

Paul examined the cavity with the torch again, but undoubtedly, as Monocloid said, it contained nothing whatever. Still, its very existence lent colour to the story.

"Clear enough now that we shall have to make the best with what we've got," said he philosophically at last, sliding the cavity shut again. "We've got two bits and two points marked in a straight line. We can sink holes along them till we hit on something."

"Yes; if you're going to stop here for the next¹ year. I've got to get back to Quetta in six weeks or so. *That* egg's no good," and Monocloid relapsed into silence again, his pursed-up lips and occasional broken whistle speaking to the activity of the mind behind his apparently dreamy eyes.

Paul, knowing from long acquaintance that in those moods Monocloid was best left alone, filled and lit his pipe, and wandered round the temples examining the

carvings. And in one corner some cigarette-ends brought back again the artist to his thoughts, and once more he had that vague feeling of disquietude at the intrusion, and then laughed at himself for his feelings. Probably long-haired and erratic, one of those funny people who write books on Hindu art to prove that the West has all to learn from the East, tell you that everything worth having has come from the old Eastern faiths, that when the West has disintegrated again the East will still be as it was. And he reflected whimsically that the last part was probably the single substratum of truth in the whole of their views; that æons hence the East will still be the same, waiting for some one to move it, being incapable of movement of itself, in fact, like the sliding block under the statue.

Monocloid's cheerful whistle roused him.

"Got it, I think," said that worthy. "Let's go home."

"What have you got?" asked Paul with real interest as they retraced their steps.

"The moon of Ramzan. The shadow."

"The moon of Ramzan doesn't throw a shadow. You want a microscope to see the bally thing."

"No, a slide-rule," was Monocloid's enigmatic reply as he led up the hill.

CHAPTER XX.

THE CALL OF THE WILD.

THE Carlos' camp stood in a little clearing in the forest, perhaps a quarter of a mile from the narrow winding road which led from Toka and Taragurh through the heart of the jungles to the tiny civil station of Khyrabad, some thirty miles farther on. Clumps of slender bamboo all around, tall shady trees overhanging the white tents, flowering sweet-smelling shrubs in bloom all about, the place was a delightful change from the stony country-side around Quetta.

Carlos, lazing in a long chair, cheroot in mouth, faded khaki riding-breeches, thorn-frayed puttees above his rope-soled sambur-hide boots, loose khaki shooting-coat and tieless khaki-shirt, felt like a schoolboy on a holiday, as with his topi tipped over his eyes he watched the antics of a pair of grey tree-squirrels.

The yellow grass-woven chick that shaded the entrance to his and Marjorie's Swiss cottage tent lifted as Marjorie came out to sit in the chair opposite, short khaki skirt and neat shooting-boots, piquante face with the white skin even more freckled than before from this open-air life, eyes sparkling with the sheer pleasure of the gipsy existence, with nothing to do but wander the jungles with Carlos, for Heather had been left with Marjorie's sister, married to a doctor at Mhow.

"Toppin' little beasts, aren't they?" said Carlos, pointing to the squirrels dashing round the trunk of a tree, chasing each other with bottle-brush tails, pretending to hide, and bolting out again with cheeps of

feigned alarm. "Do you know how they came by those marks down their backs?"

"No," said Marjorie truthfully, leaning forward to watch them better.

"Ever heard of Rama and Sita and Hanuman's bridge to Ceylon, and how when Sita was stolen by the demon king Ravan and carried off, Hanuman—the monkey god—helped Rama to build a causeway to Ceylon to get her back?"

"What's that got to do with the squirrels?"

"Well, all the beasts turned out to help Rama. The squirrels came too, but they were so tiny they couldn't lift the stones. Then Rama happened along and saw them lookin' very dejected, and being an understandin' kind of soul, he thanked them all the same for their goodwill, and stroked down their ruffled fur. And his fingers left those white stripes, so that no one should ever hurt a squirrel again, since the marks would remind men of how they had done their best to help Rama against the demons."

"That's rather a pretty story," said Stella's voice behind him.

"Hulloa, Stella; you there. I didn't hear you come out!" Carlos turned round to see Stella standing behind his chair—Stella in dainty blouse and skirt of grey, gold bangle above her elbow, neat grey suède shoes and stockings, and a gaudy Japanese parasol above the wealth of her gold-brown hair. Obviously not clad for the jungle. But Carlos, like Rama, was an understanding soul, and he knew that somewhere down the dusty road was a tonga due in an hour or so, and in that tonga would be Paul. Which is why Marjorie and he had decided to go out with the shikari and look for the hypothetical tracks of a perfectly genuine panther who had killed one of Carlos' buffalo calves, tied up for bigger game than Mr Spots.

"Nice, isn't it? There's lots of stories like that if you can only get your men to talk. That one was told to me years ago down in Rajputana one thirsty day

after blackbuck. I can see the funny old wizened shikari now, squatting in the shade of a tree, where we'd halted for a midday drink, me with a pipe, and him with a dirty little tin of opium-pills that he always carried tucked into the folds of his cummerbund. A good life ! ”

He pulled himself out of his chair, straightened his topi, and looked at his watch. “Time we started off, Marjorie, old thing. We've got some way to go. Hi ! Thakur Singh ! ”

Thakur Singh, Carlos' Dogra orderly, carrying his master's rifle, came out from behind the tents in company with a rather squat-nosed, beady-eyed, jungle man, but an old friend of Carlos', a man with eyes like a hawk for the displaced twig, the broken blade of grass, the disturbed leaf, the score of unseen nothings which he could weave into a story of the wild beast's doings as the ordinary person puts together the hundreds of little black marks on the page of a book getting the meaning of the whole all unconsciously and without effort.

“Bye-bye, Stella ! Don't forget to tell Paul to make himself at home,” and Carlos and Marjorie, with their following, disappeared round a clump of feathery bamboo, down the tiny jungle path, the sound of their talk dying away in the warm stillness of the afternoon.

Stella watched them out of sight. Nice of them to go off like that. But then they were a tactful pair. Marjorie always understood, and Carlos too. They realised without any need of words that she would rather be alone this afternoon to meet Paul, although they didn't realise the whole truth. She called to Abdul Ghaffur, the old Hindustani butler, and bade him tell Paul on arrival where she was to be found. Then with her parasol screening her head from the still hot sun, she walked along a rising path leading up to a little bush-covered tree-crowned hill, perhaps 400 yards from the camp, a hill that looked down on the road from Tara-gurh. She wanted to meet Paul all by herself, without

even the servants, somewhere away in the open, just the two of them alone, as they had been many a day in Quetta, in the sunshine with far vista of shadowed hills.

Arrived at the top of the little hillock, she sat down in the shade of a small tree, eyes on the road in front, whence soon she would see the dust rising as Paul's tonga came clattering along. And as she sat there with the warm breeze playing on her face, she visualised again, as so often of late, this meeting that she had prayed for day after day; prayed for in the blackness of the nights at Quetta, when cold fear had stabbed at her heart so frequently at the thought of anything happening to Paul; prayed for on that dark evening when the news of his being wounded had first come, before his telegrams telling them how he was had been received.

But now there would be a little breathing-space anyway, three months at least, in which she would see him almost daily, even here where he would be often away helping Monocloid in that wild-goose hunt of his, and then later be under the same roof with him at Quetta. Well, she would see to it that she made the most of this gift of the gods, ensured a little space of romance, another milestone of happiness on that long road that had frequently been so black.

And then afterwards? But she resolutely refused to visualise the afterwards. She had done that so much of late in her efforts to follow the course she had marked out, in her struggles to play the game. But now that fate had sent him back to her even for a time she would take all the happiness she could get; they would "make belief" for a time, forget the parallel lines and the dusty roads, just live in the present.

Then Carlos' story of the squirrels came back to her. Surely there was something true in that. Surely God could not be less understanding than Rama, creation of a mere human mind. If Rama rewarded the little squirrels to thank them for their goodwill, though the task was hopelessly beyond their powers, God could do

no less to her who was as tiny as the squirrels in comparison with the struggle that faced her.

After all, He had sent Paul back, sent him back in answer to her meaningless prayers, just for a little time to make life less black, to comfort her, and, above all, to let her be with him after what he had been through, even though she might give him so little of all he wanted. For even still she felt that she must not give him all he asked, clung still to those last vestiges of her ideals that weakened daily, that seemed less vivid morning by morning, as the scents and sounds of the jungles evoked the older Stella, called up Stella the woman more and more in the heavy-scented evenings with the glowing stars above.

But if she could not give him all, could not become his wife, there was much she could give him and surely do no wrong. Her companionship, her mind, her heart, her soul, her lips too if he wanted them. And at the thought her heart beat a little faster.

Then she was aware of dust upon the road, of distant clatter of hoofs; and swaying round a corner of the winding road saw a tonga, suit-case and bedding-roll over wide mud-guards; watched it swing up the road towards her, and pull up where, at the little path leading to the camp, Abdul Ghaffur had stood up to hail the driver; saw a well-remembered figure step out from the back, and then, as the servant spoke to him, saw him look up towards where her gay sunshade made a splash of colour on the bare hilltop; saw him leave the servant to take the kit to camp, and come striding up the path towards her, just a little limp in his walk. How she hoped that limp would last for months, get worse whenever the doctors boarded him. Then she put down her sunshade, rose to her feet, and stepped back over the skyline, with both hands outstretched as he reached her.

And for Paul, as he crossed the rocks of the crest to the shady side beyond, the whole sweeping landscape of jungle and distant hill narrowed to one point, big grey

eyes with wondrous shadows under the slumbrous lids, lips that he had hungered for day after dreary day and night after black night, coils of gold-brown hair and a long slim neck, skin of ivory and rose-leaf, Stella with her eyes on his.

A couple of miles away below them in the thick jungles, the slanting evening light falling through clumps of bamboo, with high tiger-grass already yellowing around the little open glades, Carlos and Marjorie, in an interval of looking at the tracks pointed out by the shikari, were smoking a wayside cigarette, Carlos at full length on a rough grass slope, and Marjorie sitting curled up at the trunk of an old tree. A few yards away Thakur Singh and the shikari squatted by a deserted ant-heap.

"Must be nice meeting some one this evening. Wish I was meeting you like that," said Marjorie, apropos of nothing as she watched the smoke of her cigarette curling upwards. "Sort of engaged feeling about it. Wouldn't you like to be engaged again? I should."

"But they aren't engaged," said matter-of-fact Carlos, his Staff College education protesting against Marjorie's inaccuracy.

"They probably will be before three days are out, though. Do you think he came here to see you and me?"

"He might have come to see you; you're looking nice enough," replied Carlos, lazily content as he gazed at his wife's still girlish figure, the breeze ruffling her hair as she sat with the topi on the ground beside her. "Rather like old days, isn't it? Remember that Christmas camp at Junglipur? I wonder if old Billy Merson and his wife said the same things about you and me that cold weather? But I was full of tact even in those days, wasn't I? Remember the way I used to sit and buck to the old man about guns and rifles and shikar generally. Wonder how he likes being at home now after about thirty years of jungle life. Probably hankers

after the smell of hot canvas every time the sun comes out."

"Anyway, they brought you and me up well, didn't they? They used to ride miles to look for game that didn't exist."

"I bet they didn't really. They did just what you and I are doing now. He sucked a black cheroot under a shady tree, and looked at her until it was time for dinner."

"Are you going to suck cheroots and look at me when you're as old as Billy Merson, and I've got grey hair and teeth that the Lord didn't give me? Only I shan't get nice white hair like Mrs Merson. Mine'll be pepper-and-salt."

"Well, that'll go well with my mustard-brown," said Carlos, stroking his thick hair. "Time we pushed on, I think, and had a look at that last bait." He flung away his cigarette-end and tightened his puttee. "Though I don't suppose they'll fret even if we are late for dinner," he added parenthetically.

And Stella and Paul, in the shade of the hilltop as the sun sank down to the wide rim of the jungle, wouldn't have cared just then if there had been no such thing as dinner or any camp to return to in the whole world. They were together, and that was enough—together with the golden glow of the sunset on tree and rock and flowering shrub, the first faint haze of evening creeping up below them, and all problems forgotten for the moment in the sheer happiness of their reunion after trial.

For both alike at the moment were content to take the "now" of happiness unquestioned, the "now" that little more than a month ago had seemed so immeasurably far away, so almost impossible of attainment. Content to sit for a space with their arms about each other, and in the pure joy of bodily contact after months of solitude, to forget for an instant those torturing thoughts which had haunted them both so long.

"And this time, dear, it's *I* that have brought you

up the winding path off the dusty road, isn't it ? " said Stella, nestling into his shoulder. " And we just won't think about going back for a little while, will we ? We'll 'let's pretend' there aren't any such things as long straight roads."

And as they walked down the hill hand in hand to the shadows growing about the camp below, Paul felt that he had gone through fire and water and come out again into life—life as it is meant to be lived, one man and one woman. And he meant to do as Stella said, to use "the morphia of the gods," to "let's pretend" a while, and felt that so he would find content, find rich happiness, thinking that the feelings which had returned in the quiet hospital at Tank might endure. Forgetting in fact that he was a man and Stella a woman, creatures of flesh and blood.

But even that night as he lay in bed by the open door of his tent looking out at the great stars hanging above, with the rustle of the forest breeze playing through the thick fronds of the bamboos, with the myriad faint sounds of the night life of the jungle about him, the jungle teeming with life, vibrant with the call of nature that knows of no ideals, that deals on one plane only, once again those older feelings that had been so insistent in Waziristan plucked at him, and æon-old-inherited memories surged up anew. Thoughts of delirious sweetness come down from the days when man in the beginning had first understood love as something far greater than the mere blind instinct of racial perpetuation, something infinitely different from the simple need that came to him with his body from the beasts ; had learnt with keener vision of awakening soul to see something indefinitely higher and more wonderful, and yet something fifty times more clamorous, in the relationship of himself and *the* woman, something deathless, eternal, something as enduring as the wheeling stars above.

And once again ere he slept Paul realised the struggle, the almost impossibility of carrying on like this, of

going through life with only one-half of his nature satisfied, and, realising, called himself a beast, and slept.

But morning saw him with vision clear again for a time, as before sunrise the four of them gathered in shooting-kit around the little camp-table for breakfast, for Carlos had arranged a beat for the panther who had been so attentive in the vicinity of late.

And when an hour later they set out, Paul walking along with Stella in the growing sunlight, his double express trailing over his shoulder, he was primitive man again, but primitive man delighting in the companionship of the woman of the dawn, grey eyes unshadowed, alight with clean joy of life, with the pleasure of the dawn trail, creatures of fresh sunlight and wind-swept spaces, man and woman as God made them, to take joy in soundness of wind and limb, in keenness of eye and sureness of hand, in their dominion over the lesser animals of His creation. And he marked rather Stella's eyes than her lips, the spring of her tread over the rocks rather than the lines of her figure, the quick alertness of her speech more than the dreaminess of her thoughts. Did, in fact, as he was meant to ; found something in her to match his every mood ; found in her, as he always had, the woman unspoilt, who can be half a dozen women to the one man, wife and mother, mistress and sister and friend.

Carlos halted at the top of a little rocky slope, whence a long outcrop of rock formed a natural division of the jungle, nearly two hundred yards of comparative open ending in a slightly lower rise, on which were gathered some fifty beaters, semi-clad, beady-eyed, jungle Gonds with little axes ; ragged haired goatherds in coarse cotton, with dull round faces ; the shikari and a couple of friends in discarded khaki garments of sahibs who had shot with them ; Thakur Singh, trim and neat in shirt and shorts and puttees, tight-tied khaki pagri over his straight-cut features, whose every line showed the blood of the Rajput of the northern hills.

"This is the place, Paul. I'll take this end and you take the other. Thakur Singh can do stop in that little dip in the middle. You and Stella have got to sit up on that high rock there. It'll be as safe as a machan, and more comfortable."

So Stella and Paul walked across the open in the bright sunlight, and settled themselves on the top of the heap of rocks, the topmost boulder of which rose nine or ten feet above the smaller ones composing the base, and Paul had to wriggle his way up a little crevice and lean out to help up Stella. And once again as she grasped his hands and he pulled her up, he felt how good it would be if they lived in an older simpler world, where there were no other calls, and she and he were free in the forests as in the dawn of time.

And Stella too, lying by his side in the now hot sunlight, looking out over the clearing in front at the thick growth where the last of the beaters were disappearing in single file, felt also old primitive feelings stirring within her, the desire that this man should take her as his mate, take her for all time. The blood of a hundred women before her throbbed in her veins as she lay there watching *her* man, as she always thought of him—rifle laid out before him waiting for the game,—just as some of those earlier women who had gone into her making through the centuries had lain out with *their* men in the wild—gaunt lean men with heavy bow and gay-feathered arrow ready strung, lain ready to hand up another shaft, or crouched with flint knife and sinew-lashed spear behind their mates to meet the onslaught of the bear, or fished with treble barb and coarse line at the rock-bound pools with the thought of hungry little mouths in the smoke-blackened home cave.

"A good life," as Carlos had said. Primeval, if you like, but clean. And as Flora Annie Steele has it, the hunter may be marked with the brand of Cain, but murder is not the worst of crimes, even to-day.

"Rather fun, isn't it, Stella?" said Paul, looking round. "Ever seen a panther in the open?"

"Only once, with daddy. But I love being out in the wild like this."

"We always do like the same things, don't we?"

Then the little second shikari behind them whispered for silence, as far away in the jungle a faint call came down the breeze, a call repeated three times to show the beat had begun. Followed tense silence as they craned their ears for the least sound. And then slowly, as happens with good beaters well supervised, the jungle came gradually to life as the advancing line of hidden men pressed slowly forward with click of axe and lathi on tree-trunk, faint "Sh—sh," just noise enough to wake a sleeping beast, to tell him to move on from the fancied danger which threatened from the approaching unarmed men into the unscented danger that lay ahead, just noise enough for that, no more.

A heavy flutter of wings and raucous cries of alarm as two peafowl broke out of cover and flapped their heavy way overhead, the male bronze and gold, green and turquoise against the sky, the sombre plumage of the female in his wake.

Then a sharp little whistle of fear as a slender-limbed barking deer trotted out to stand an instant stock-still on the edge of the clearing, pricked ears and quivering nostrils to the tainted breeze behind, all unaware of the figures lying motionless upon the rocks ahead. Then he bolted down the slope to the right, and vanished in the brush.

Then the first sounds of the beaters' lathis as the breeze freshened, and once a glimpse of waving pagri, where one man had climbed a tree to see what lay in a dip beyond.

Suddenly Paul stiffened to his rifle, every nerve taut, as Stella pressed his arm with a low whispered "Ah!" of wonder and admiration as noiselessly from the bush seventy yards in front a long lithe form stalked out, and paused, half-turned, with curious ears to the noise behind. Skin of what seemed almost yellow-dappled black velvet in the shadow, changing to black-dappled

yellow as the magnificent beast turned again into the sunlight; tail twitching from side to side, waiting an instant ere moving on.

Then as the great cat emerged into the open at a slow walk and checked again an instant clear on a little rise, Paul brought his sights on, and the silence was broken by the sharp crack of the express, a crack almost simultaneous with the dull thud that every hunter knows as the panther went down as though pole-axed, and as instantly came to its feet again, to leap snarling across the clearing wide-mouthed and blazing-eyed.

But at thirty yards the second barrel took it full in the chest, and it reared its full height to fling over sideways on the ground, twitching huddle of limbs, claws tearing up the ground, and teeth grinding on a broken branch; then slowly stiffened out to lie still in the sunlight, vivid black and yellow, with white fur of under parts against the sun-dried soil.

The beaters, just reaching the clearing, stayed at the sound of the shots, and a dead silence hung over the forest for a minute as Paul, hurriedly reloading, watched the black-and-yellow heap yonder, ready to fire again at the least sign of movement. Then his shikari's shrill call of triumph behind him roused the forest to answering echoes as the line of beaters broke cover with quick chatter and yells of joy.

Paul shouted to them to halt, lest the beast be not yet dead. But the stones and abuse which the shikari behind him hurled at the cattle-thief brought no answering sound or movement, though his arm was as strong and accurate as his tongue was fluent and vituperative, and three times his hard-flung pebbles thudded against the panther's ribs.

"Stone dead, I think," said Paul to Stella, rising to his feet. "What a beauty, isn't he? Seems almost black from here. Wait here till I get down and make sure he's done for."

Then he swung himself down the rock with the aid of his shikari, and, limping leg all forgotten, hurried

over to the dead beast, and as he went the beaters swarmed up too, while Carlos came over the ridge at a run, excited as any schoolboy, rejoicing that Paul's leave should have opened so well.

Stone dead, Paul saw as he reached it, and marked the hole where the second bullet, after tearing transversely across the chest from front to rear, had passed out behind the ribs. A great, heavy, well-fed cattle-killer, massive of shoulder and slight of loin, enormous rippling muscles down the forearms to where the velvet pads sheathed the crooked yellow talons, and a head like that of a small tiger.

He ran back to help Stella down from her perch as Carlos hailed Marjorie to come over, Thakur Singh for once excited out of his usual Dogra calm at the sight of such a trophy.

"The biggest one I've ever seen, Stella!" said Paul as he helped her down the rock. "You'll have a lucky-bone brooch as long as your finger."

And his face was like a boy's at the moment, it seemed to Stella—every trace of the strain of the late months gone, all the marks of the shadows and the recent blackness vanished, swept away for an instant by the sheer triumphant joy of primitive man at the prize of the chase, the joy which is above almost all physical joys, though sometimes mingled a little later with a passing regret at having put an end to something so very beautiful.

And as Stella stood admiring the almost unscarred skin, the great muscles, the undamaged teeth ivory against the black lips, the great fierce head that the beaters propped up to show the unusually long whiskers, and listened to Paul and Carlos' excited comments, once more those unknown forebears of hers called to her down the uncounted years from the dark forests of primeval Europe, from the shadowed woods of Saxon days, from the forgotten bronze and flint ages, to know why she waited when this clean-limbed boyish-faced hunter and fighter wanted her, wanted her as a thousand

similar clean-limbed fighters and hunters had wanted—and taken—they, all unresisting and glad.

And that night when the panther had been skinned and they had all been to have a last look at the shikaris busy rubbing in alum and wood ashes to rough-cure the great painted hide, Stella went to bed, to lie awake for hours, despite the somewhat tiring day.

And more and more those predecessors of hers called insistently to her, with wordless silent voices that throbbed in her veins, to know why she delayed to take the full of life, to taste the mingled bitter and sweet of love, the pain that is swallowed up in joy beyond all thinking; why she was not ready to hand on the torch of life that they had handed on to her.

And as she lay there open-eyed in the faint starlight, looking out under the chick she had raised to let the faint breeze play upon her, for the night was unusually warm, her cherished ideals of the past seemed to be growing even feebler as she watched them, and the winding hill paths blotted out more and more the straight road she had talked of so bravely only twenty-four hours before.

CHAPTER XXI.

STELLA'S PROMISE.

"I JUST *hate* your going away again to-morrow, Paul, even though it's only for a few days. I'm sure Monocloid can work by himself, and I don't want the silly treasure, and you don't either, even if there is any to find."

Stella, seated on the little hill where she had waited for Paul the first day he had come to the Carlos' camp, looked down at him a foot or so below her, stretched lazily on the sunny slope, sucking his pipe as Stella had so often visualised him in Quetta, worn shooting-coat and somewhat frayed shorts, his topi on the ground beside him, leaving his thick hair, that always pleased Stella so much, free to the faint breeze that came in little gusts over the tree-tops below them.

"You know I don't want to go, Stella, but I promised Monocloid that I wouldn't be away more than a week at the outside. He's dead keen to get on with the job, and by now he must have worked out this new stunt of his."

Paul turned half-round to look at her, reaching out to touch her hand. "You know what it's been to me to be separated from you all this time. You don't think I'd go away again if I could help it, do you?"

"No-o," said she slowly. "No, I know you wouldn't. And you did promise him. You always keep your promises—man."

And then she fell silent, thinking how very, very faithfully he had kept his word over not thinking, or

at least not talking, of anything except the present, of this little respite from the haunting problems. She thought too of the times, recurring more and more frequently each day now, when she wished he wouldn't keep his promises, wished that he would try and make her see his views more strongly, use that power of his of reading her thoughts to help him, seize those times of weakening of her ideals which she knew that he could feel so well to make her yield—times when she had let her thoughts go out to him, invitation almost to make him try to influence her, and seen that though he understood he yet refrained, marvelled at the self-control he had over himself ; times also when she had realised how hard it was for him, had seen the little weakenings just showing, and then recoiled upon herself lest she should be traitor to him who had been so true to her.

But now to-day, with him going away again to-morrow, she felt that she must talk with him, get into words all she felt, make him voice his thoughts, the thoughts that she could read so easily. She would have days alone again next week when she could balance things out once more if the darkness didn't come down and refuse to let her balance anything at all.

"Paul, when you were up in Waziristan you used to write and tell me of the blackness of things, of the bad time you were having, and even when you didn't write it I could read it in your letters. I always can read you in what you write, you're so very vivid, even when perhaps you don't mean to be. Listen ; will you tell me something about it all, so that I can really understand better ; let me hear it from your lips instead of seeing it on paper. I do so want to realise all you go through, get hold of all your feelings, know you absolutely."

She leant forward a little, her eyes on his face, just the least nuance of entreaty in her tone. And Paul looked up at her wondering, not fully grasping what she was asking nor why she was asking it, trying to get at the Stella behind the words.

"You've never talked about it since you came back, you see, and I want to know if it's still there, and what form it's taking. I do know it's been hard, and I want to see if I can make it easier. And most of all, Paul, I want to feel that there's nothing that happens to either of us ever that the other doesn't feel and understand to the utmost. Tell me something about it, Paul."

With her disengaged hand she stroked his hair, and at the touch all the old longings swept over him again, and Stella knew it and was glad. She wanted him to want her always, to feel that he wanted her as she wanted him, consciously, clamorously, every day and all day.

"I wrote lots of it to you, Stella," he said as he caught her hand and kissed it, kisses that almost burnt.

"I know you did, Paul, but I want to hear it again; I want to be told it because when you're talking to me I can feel what you're thinking ever so much more strongly than when you're only writing from hundreds of miles away. I can get hold of your thoughts, understand all the things you mean and don't say, get down into touch with the very real you."

And Paul, with his power of perception, his possession of that sense for which science has no recognised name, but which to some few people is perhaps the most important of all the senses, the sense that is independent of eye or ear, of taste or smell or touch, that is above and beyond and through all the rest, understood somewhat of what Stella wanted. And so he told her again much of what he had been through in those bad days when everything was utterly and hopelessly black. And as he talked, halting sometimes for words, picking and choosing phrases which to any but Stella would have veiled his real meaning, she got nearer and nearer to the real Paul, felt what he had suffered, and thereby suffered the more acutely herself.

And as he talked to her, the longing for her, to have her all his life, grew more and more, grew to those

same cravings that had torn at him day and night on the border, cravings which Stella could feel growing in him as she listened.

"Don't you understand what it means, Stella? Can't you see what it spells for me to have to go through life without you?" All unconsciously he had begun to plead his case again, pleading a hundred times the stronger for what he had been through of late. "You know me so well, you can see that I've found now what I've always vaguely wanted without realising it. That I have learnt now that what I want is *you* to help me go through life. I used to think I could get along all right by myself, but now I *know* I can't, that I must have some one to help me, and that some one must be you. I know other people manage it, perhaps I'm weaker, but anyway I'm different and I can't. And then all sorts of bogies come along at the thought of not having you to help me. I've done my best to keep straight all my life, tried hard. And it doesn't get any easier as life goes on, gets harder. And I don't want to make a mess of things, the less now because I've learnt to love you. And loving you I couldn't think of any one else, and yet if I try and carry on by myself I'm bound to come a mucker." And as he stopped a moment there were shadows in his eyes, and Stella saw what Paul's men had never seen, something not unlike fear in the grey eyes that were usually so steady.

"I want you more than all the world, Stella; you're just the one person that would make up life for me as I want it. I used to think I was an ordinary level kind of man, but since I've known you I've seen all sorts of heights that might be climbed, but with them have shown up all kinds of appalling precipices, black things that I never knew were in me, and they frighten me, Stella. Stella! it isn't right or fair that one should have to go on like this, either you or me, because I know you want me just as much as I want you. I don't know or care much about God, but I do know that He didn't make us to be miserable as some people try to tell one.

You may not care about the idea of divorce, but surely that's infinitely better than that you and I should be hopelessly unhappy all our lives. There's no ideal about that anyway."

And Stella, listening, felt again, as she had felt that day under Murdar, that a crisis was coming, only this time she knew it was to be a far bigger one, that now it was not a question of putting things away indefinitely as she had done then, that she would have to make a real decision soon, if not to-day anyway before a month was out, and that on that decision would hang the whole of a lifetime. Yet, as happens between two people really in tune, the sight of Paul going down into the shadows nerved her somehow to try and climb a little out of the darkness that had been her lot of late, to try and help him when he was down.

"Stella, won't you give up those ideas of yours, just take me and happiness together? Chase away all the darkness, and let's get out into the sunlight together for the rest of our lives. We've hung on long enough now. You've done your best to play the game, and, honest, I've done all I can to help you, and I'm just down and out now. Stella, say you'll marry me! Say that you'll get that divorce; it won't take any time, and I'll get leave and we'll go home together and get married. Stella, will you?"

And Stella knew then, and realised that he knew too, that if he only took her in his arms and stifled her words with kisses, added just that little straw to all that pressed upon her, everything would go. But Paul, knowing it just as well as she, would not. Even then he wanted Stella to come to him uncoerced, would take no advantage from the power that a man like him has from his intuition of a woman's feelings. He wanted Stella more than ever, but he wanted her to come to him with clear brain, wanted Stella of the "thinks" to give the order, not Stella of the slumbrous eyes and passionate lips, swept off her feet by all her intense longing for him.

And so he sat there tense, his eyes drinking in her face, every sense alert to catch her thoughts, to read her mind.

The sunlit silence lay over the hillside, the forest below them hazy in the heat of the late afternoon, the blue hills about Taragurh shimmering below the cloudless sky as the two sat there, one Stella longing for Paul to take her in his arms and make her say yes ; the other with clouded brain trying to marshal up those threadbare arguments that seemed to have lost all force now in the face of the crying want of this man whom they both loved, who appealed beyond all others to Stella of the ideals for the dreams and ideals that were so much of his make-up, and appealed as much to Stella the woman of the starlight and Stella the woman of the dawn—longing for love and all that goes therewith, for fulness of physical life, for passionate love of man and woman.

“Stella, say you will ? ”

The words fell upon Stella's ears, the ears of Stella of the ideals, and spurred her to hazy action as she realised that the thoughts that prompted them had already gained the other Stella. And with the knowledge that unless she acted at once she was lost, in a broken voice Stella of the ideals made her last protest, the playing for time of one who realises that the fight is all but lost.

“Paul, dear, I can't see clearly now somehow. Give me a little time to think, only a little week, and then I'll tell you. The day you come back I *promise* I'll say. Let me try and get my mind clear just once again. I want you so, but I want you to have all of me, not only part. Perhaps I can get things straight in myself if I have just a little time.”

And then, and then only, did Paul, with infinite tenderness, draw her to him, soothing the coils of her brown hair, kissing her eyes, her parted lips, as she lay still in his arms, tired out with the struggle she had made, conscious only of the respite, of the quiet strength

of the man she loved, of the power that once again he had not put out to break her when he might have.

But when they returned to camp before dinner, Marjorie, the observant, wondered what had happened, for there was just the least little something that spoke of strain about them, and Stella looked tired and was less talkative than usual. As a natural result Marjorie was longer than of custom undressing, rather silent in front of the X table that served her for dressing-table, where, framed in filmy garments, she was plaiting her thick long hair. Carlos, in pyjamas, was sitting up cross-legged on his camp-bed smoking a cigarette.

"What are they playing at?" said he, admiring Marjorie's profile against the tent wall.

"Heaven only knows," said his wife, coming out of her thoughts and finishing the plait with a piece of bebe ribbon. "I'm beginning to be out of my depth, and I never thought that would happen to me."

"Doesn't as a rule, old thing, does it? Is it him or is it her? Which is hanging fire?"

"Not Paul, anyway. I wish I could get inside Stella's thoughts. I used to think I could, but I seem to have lost the power. Really, I'd like to shake the girl sometimes now."

Marjorie slipped from one lot of filminess into another even more attractive as Carlos extinguished the end of his cigarette and settled down.

"Well, he'll be back in a week anyway, and perhaps they'll work it then," said he. "Unless, of course, it was only photos all the time."

"I've seen enough photos taken to understand the process thoroughly," Marjorie said, making for her bed. "This is the double express, only something's gone wrong somewhere."

"Last in bed puts out the light," said Carlos luxuriously from his pillow.

"Born lazy," said his wife, reaching for the lamp.

But as she blew it out she wished very much that she could get into Stella's head and see what was going on

there, and try and put that lady's thoughts into the right direction, which right direction to Marjorie pointed to a nice wedding at Quetta early in March. They'd taken time enough in all conscience, and now the man had with the most amazing luck got back from that filthy Waziristan, and here was the girl still apparently unable to settle things. Marjorie was beginning to lose her patience.

If she had been able to get into Stella's head, though, she would have had several kinds of a shock. Stella, in the tent opposite watching the Carlos' light go out, and glad of the darkness, slipped out of bed to tie up the chick, and let the air play on her face as she looked up at the stars and at the little moon sinking to the horizon.

She felt a complete pulp at present, quite unable to think clearly. The only two things that she could realise at all were that she had definitely promised Paul an answer in a week—what that answer was to be she was quite incapable of visualising—and that her continual overwhelming longing for him had now ceased to leave her even for a single conscious moment.

What she would like her answer to be, every pulse in her body told her as she stood there, a slim white-draped figure in the faint moonlight, drinking in the night air with its sensations of insistent life, its appeal to all the more primitive emotions, the heavy scent of flowering shrubs, and the gorgeous stars above. And to Stella, responsive to nature in all her moods, there was no question as to what she would make that answer if only another Stella, very bruised and oh! so tired, would only stop whispering to her from time to time in a hopelessly weary voice, "Yes, but what *ought* it to be?"

Then dawn, which usually brought some measure of clearness, brought none, and she faced the breakfast-table—with Paul's tonga, which had come overnight, waiting at the road with his kit ready tied on—with a heavy head and tired eyes and a feeling of interior darkness and misery, product of many sleepless hours,

of a brain that would not think or help her, merely kept awake, running aimless circles round a pattern of "wants" and "oughts," and stopping every now and then at all sorts of specially delectable wants, the sweetness of whose contemplation was always marred by the subsequent feeling that they belonged to the category of "might not be's."

And somehow she felt after Paul had gone that her excuse of "letters to be written" when she retired to her tent had not convinced Marjorie overmuch, more especially as Stella was not in the habit of writing many letters, except to Paul.

Paul, on the other hand, in the jolting tonga on the narrow jungle road, horses' heads towards Taragurh, felt lighter than many a day of late. He had really had a chance of explaining things to Stella, and the mere process of voicing the thoughts which he had had to keep so tightly locked up for months had cleared his brain, got rid for a while of the obsessions that had preyed on it so long. Surely now Stella wouldn't hesitate much longer when he had shown her all she meant to him, shown her not only that he wanted her beyond everything, but that her companionship was absolutely vital to him, that without her he simply could not carry on. Surely now she would not let those silly ideals hinder her any more, would take a saner view of life, look at things from a more practical workaday standpoint. Yes; this day week he would be driving back along this same road, and find Stella waiting for him to tell him that her doubts were ended, that he and she had come to the end of the dusty road, and reached the path leading up to the high valleys, which they would enter hand-in-hand, with all the past darkness and pain forgotten.

Then he also fell to visualising things: where they would go as soon as they got married, and what life would be ever after—thoughts he had sometimes hardly dared to contemplate before, because they were so remote and so uncertain, and the thought that they

might not come to pass had led to such depths of blackness. But now in the sunlight, with the knowledge that another week would see everything all right, he let his mind go, and built himself fairy palaces of delight—fairy palaces inhabited by some one with great, grey eyes clear of all suffering, eyes under slumbrous lids, eyes that turn by turn could sparkle with the fresh sunlight of dawn or be dark with all the spangled loveliness of the tropic night.

And when Taragurh loomed up close ahead, he thought of the Carlos' promised visit to see Monocloid in camp. Stella would come too, of course, and they would have a perfect day in the old fort. She would love that, thoroughly enjoy exploring the ruins, seeing the quaint carvings of the temples, the little summer-houses in the palace. She would just love listening to his reconstruction of the past, telling her about the old buildings, and be able to see with him, as only she could, all the past alive again, weave fancies round the deserted rooms of queens long dead.

Yes, life altogether was promising well, and the blackness surely gone for ever. It had tried to come back once or twice this last week when the craving for Stella had surged up anew at the sight of her, at her companionship, which was so delightful and yet so altogether insufficient, limited to less than half the day when he wanted her all day and all night. It had come up badly once. But that was surely done with now, and at the thought of what the future would hold, of all it was to bring to him and Stella, he caught new interest in life, in the little things around, noticed the wayside birds and plants as he had not done for many a day.}

He began to think of Monocloid and the treasure, and felt quite a thrill at the prospect of the search—a thrill that had been utterly absent before, when Monocloid and the treasure were only of interest in that they brought him nearer to Stella.

So when at last he tumbled out of his tonga at the foot of the great cliff whose scarp sides ran up to the

fort, he was nearer the Paul Merriman whose great-uncle had given him that piece of jade in Sussex over a year ago than he had been for many months. Only now an infinitely more-developed Paul, one who had learnt through suffering to possess his soul, one who had at last learnt what he really wanted, what was the one thing for which he was ready to sacrifice all else, what was for him the only thing that mattered, as indeed it should be for nearly every man and woman—the possession of the one man or the one woman who can round off life and make the perfect whole.

It was a strange feeling of exultation that clung about him as he climbed the narrow path up to the Khuni Darwaza, a sensation of having at last left the dusty flats and come indeed to the precincts of those gardens of delight that he had visualised as lying behind a woman's eyes on that far-away evening at Quetta, with the gaudy dresses and cheerful music of "Brighter Baluchistan" making a half-seen, half-heard background to the sweetest profile and the dearest voice he knew.

CHAPTER XXII.

BURJ-I-FATEH.

WHEN Paul arrived in their camp near the Tower of Victory, he found Monocloid dozing on a camp-bed outside his tent, while his servant was laying the table for tiffin under the big banyan-tree. He cast himself into a camp-chair, demanding a drink, and when the man produced it the sleeper woke up at the sound of the voices, and turned over drowsily, blinking at Paul. Then, realising who it was, he sat up, and, fishing for his eyeglass, screwed it into his eye.

"What luck?" queried Paul, lighting a cigarette.

"Got it last night. Been up till about 4 G.M. mucking round with a slide-rule and covering pages of paper with figures. You're back just in time."

"Got what? The treasure?" Paul sat up excitedly. "Have you found the bally place?"

"Not 'xactly. But I've found what they call a 'clue' in the cheap detective novels. Guess I'm some kind of a Sherlock Holmes. But say, Bo'! Old Badulla was a cunning knut. I wonder if he mistrusted the other coves, and thought they'd do the dirty on him if he told 'em too much. Seems to have been a bit of an astronomer too, like old Jai Singh what built the observatories. Didn't know there was so much higher mathematics about the moon before."

"What on earth are you getting at? Do be a bit lucid if you can." Paul sank back into his chair again, wondering what hare Monocloid was chasing now.

"Lucidity is my strongest point—that and logic,

irresistible logic. That's why so many people can't follow me—their lack of logic and inability to appreciate cold hard fact."

Monocloid sat looking at the man getting the table ready, squatting on his camp-bed with his arms round his knees. "Did I ever tell you the story of the logical Bolshie spy? Talking of moonshine made me think of it. Way back in . . ."

"Blow the Bolshie spy! Get on with Badulla and the treasure. I didn't come back here to listen to your yarns of Bolshie spies."

"Right-o. I'll put aside the Bolshie for the moment and see if you can grasp the marvellous facts that I've got hold of since you've been away. How's Carlos and Mrs? Likewise Mrs Nash?"

"Going strong. Sent you salaams. But for the Lord's sake, get on with the story. What *have* you found?"

"What have I found? Well, the new moon is to be spotted about the same place as the sun goes down. Have you ever seriously appreciated the importance of that scientific phenomenon?" He waited, whistling, for Paul's answer, which didn't come. The only thing evidently was to let Monocloid talk. In time he might come to the point.

"Evidently you haven't tumbled to the vital bearing of this extract from the 'Child's Guide to Knowledge.' Anyway, that being so, any one who looked in that particular direction would observe both together."

"Unless he happened to be tight, as you seem to be at the moment." Paul wondered if Monocloid would ever talk sense.

"Therefore it is safe to assume that Badulla, duly surrounded with be-cauteous houris, looked out of his window one evening, having just woken up from a sherbert-induced sleep. I wonder if Pierre Rivecourt introduced him to the charms of French brandy? Well, he looked out, and, being of a romantic turn of mind, sent for the court engraver, him of the pink waistcoat,

with spindle shanks and horn specs, and commanded him to bring the royal engraving outfit and write extracts from the local guide-book upon a broken jade charm dropped that morning by the third housemaid while bringing in Badulla's early tea. 'Came to bits in me 'and' was probably what she said in squeaky Persian. And I expect the old bird chuckled a bit when he had the engraving done. The thing's so ruddy obvious to any one who isn't altogether blind once you start thinking about it."

"Didn't seem to be so ruddy obvious to you first go off," said Paul. But he was beginning to get interested. Evidently Monocloid had got a theory of sorts.

"I wasn't thinking then. I was looking for Gopal's chunk. I wonder who the hell's got hold of that, by the way?"

"We haven't, anyway, so go on with the plot. It's thickening like your brain whenever one tries to get anything out of it. What did Badulla mean by his gas about the sun and the moon?"

"I've told you. You see them both at the same time in the same direction more or less. If that happened to be behind the Tower of Victory, the setting sun would be pitching a long shadow. And at one special moment—namely, when in Ramzan of 1762 the new moon first showed—the end of the shadow would be resting on one particular spot, wouldn't it? And if any one took the trouble to work out the variation for any subsequent year, allowing for the few days' difference between the Muhammadan and Gregorian calendars, he could say just where the shadow ought to be. Or reversewise, he could plot out where the shadow was that year. Got it now?" Monocloid rolled off his bed and stretched.

"More or less. What you mean is that the end of the shadow of the tower marks the place where the Nawáb hid his treasure? You're a bit of a genius sometimes."

"Not necessarily the place. Perhaps the entry to

the passage. There's nothing else it can be. You sit at the king's window, which, according to my cousin, who has a nose for ancient monuments, is the one I showed you, and at sunset the sun throws the shadow of the tower towards you, and at a certain date in a certain year the point of that shadow gives the spot."

"Have you marked it?"

"What for?" Monocloid was fastening his chaplis as he spoke. Like everything else he owned, they were of a patent make of his own. "No. But I worked out the bearing and the distance. Took me three blinkin' days to do, and I got involved with all sorts of times. Solar times and lunar times, not to mention sidereal dittoes. The answer is 197 feet at a bearing of $87\frac{1}{2}$ degrees from the base of the tower, which by the look of it is somewhere near that little tumble-down building over there." And he pointed to the domed building not so far from where, all unknown to them, Taylor had dug down that first night to find the passage.

"Well, what do we do now?"

"Lunch. Then we'll go have a look-see."

For the rest of the time until lunch appeared, and all through the meal, he carried on a long discussion as to the exact amount of Nordic blood the Nawab Badulla might have had in his composition, the question of the treasure and of the shadow clean gone from his mind.

But when the meal was over, and they set out with measuring-tape and compass, there was a certain keenness in Monocloid's normally dreamy eyes that told of as much suppressed excitement as showed more clearly in Paul's face—Paul who wanted to find the treasure not for its own sake half so much as for the feeling that somehow both quests would end together; that, finding it, the purpose of the jade would have been achieved—the jade which somehow linked him and Stella. And he would most certainly have come to the end of the quest of whose existence he had no idea a year ago—the quest which now made up his whole life, the search for happiness.

Then they came to the Tower of Victory, its weathered walls showing more traces of time now in the hot sunlight than they did in the dawn-light or in the evening shadows. But even so it was a wonderful piece of work, towering into the sky above them like an arrow of stone, not a crack in its masonry after these four hundred years and more that it had stood there to mark the pride of Islam. Stella would like to see it, thought Paul, as he held the end of the tape, while Monocloid walked out on the bearing he laid, with his prismatic compass carefully adjusted for the occasion.

The line ran straight towards the domed summer-house, and the final measurement brought them within the carved walls nearly to the centre of the building.

"That's funny," said Paul. "If you've got it right, how could the shadow have marked anything? The end of it must have fallen on the roof of this shanty."

Monocloid, sitting in a carved wall recess whistling, was considering the cracked stones of the floor, marble-tiled.

"Went over the bally thing three times, and got the same answer each go. Besides, why shouldn't it have fallen on this? Old bird wouldn't want to be seen digging out in the open anyway, even in the royal gardens. The mali would have come along to see if he was pinching the young potatoes or something, or counting the carrots to do him out of his lawful perks." Monocloid took off his topi and considered it. Then he slipped off the wall, and started examining the floor. "Trapdoor of sorts probably," he remarked as he cleared the interstices of the stonework with his knife-blade. The stones were large for the most part, slabs of once-white marble, carved in patterns round the edges, lines of twining leaves and conventional flowers.

"Listen," he said suddenly. "That stone doesn't give quite the same sound as the others." And as Paul knelt beside him it certainly did seem as if there was the faintest difference in the noise as Monocloid tapped first on one flag and then on another.

“The thing sounds as if it might be hollow,” said Paul. “But how the devil could it be? Surely some one would have pulled it up before now. I’ll bet the Mahrattas rooted up the place properly when they took it. From the way they handled old Gopal Tiwari, it seems pretty clear that they had a good suspicion that there was something worth finding.”

“It may have been yanked up and put back again,” said Monocloid. “Anyway, we’ll have the stone up and see. But the first thing to do now is to shift camp. We don’t want to have the servants hanging about if there’s anything to find. Then we’ll come along later with a crowbar or a pick and set to work.”

And as they walked back to the tents, Monocloid fashion, drifting straight from one theme to another, he proceeded to give Paul a résumé through the ages of ways and means of eliciting information on hidden stores from people who weren’t anxious to convey the required details.

They spent an hour looking for a suitable camp site, finally selecting a little open space just outside the palace walls on the west side of the hill, out of sight of the summer-house. It was a more shady spot, with two big neem-trees, which gave an excuse for moving camp without conveying any suspicions. Moreover, it was further from the tanks on top of the hill, and—in theory anyway—rather less populated with mosquitoes. During tea they had a long discussion as to how much to tell Diwan Ali, who, it was clear, had no idea so far as to the existence of any treasure. They finally decided to tell him that they had records of the fort as it was in his ancestor’s time, and were going to try and dig up one of the passages on the chance of finding old weapons such as sometimes come to light in excavations. Paul had a fondness for any old metal-work, and his quarters at Quetta had always been adorned with some nice specimens of armourer’s work picked up in different corners of the world during his travels, which lent colour to the story.

The next morning, taking Diwan Ali with some tools, they entered the domed pavilion, with its fretted windows and carved sandstone pillars, and set to work to prise up the great marble flag that Monocloid had remarked upon as sounding hollow the previous day. It was bedded firmly into the blocks around, so that it took them an hour to upend it, and then they found below it, instead of the opening they had hoped for, nothing but close-packed earth, undisturbed save in one place, where there was a small hole, as though a rat or other animal had burrowed its way up only to run against the stone.

"Dud show," said Paul, mopping his face. The morning was still, and it was warm working in the pavilion. "Wonder why it sounded hollow yesterday when we hit it? It's on solid ground."

But Monocloid was peering at the little hole in the centre of the caked earth whereon the stone had rested so long. "Here, lend me that crowbar a minute," he said excitedly. "I want to have a dig at this hole here. There oughtn't to be a hole like this underneath a stone block. No animal's fool enough to do a thing like that."

He took the crowbar from Paul, who had been using it to prise up the great flag-stone which now lay beside beside them upon the floor, and pushed it into the hole. The earth was caked and solid, almost of the consistency of mortar, but as he worked the bar in suddenly it seemed to slip, and he found himself hanging on to the last few inches of it with the other end moving freely underground, and below them they heard the dull sound of falling earth.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Paul as Monocloid withdrew the bar again. "We were right after all! We must have hit the thing just over the hole, and that's why it sounded hollow. What a chance! But where's the real opening?"

"Here, I think," said Monocloid, getting to his feet and reaching for the pickaxe which Diwan Ali was holding. "Probably find that they've got another stone

underneath with a layer of earth above to deaden the sound in case any one thought of tapping it."

He swung up the pick and broke into the caked soil. A few minutes and the pick-point crashed into something tougher than the earth, tougher but not so hard. "Thought so," said Monocloid, as Diwan Ali shovelled away the spoil he had loosened. "No giddy mistake about its being hollow. Listen to that." And he drove the pick in again. Then suddenly the earth he stood on quivered, and he stepped back just in time to see the ground where he had stood an instant earlier cave in and settle down, while in the centre of it the loosened earth poured downwards in a funnel, from the bottom of which came the sound of falling fragments.

"Look out!" he called as he jumped back on to the firm stonework. "Something's given underneath."

But as he did so the earth ceased sliding, and there before them was a rough-edged hole, perhaps a foot in diameter and a couple of feet deeper than the still close-packed soil at the edges of the stonework, and at the bottom the blackness of a cavity.

Monocloid lay down on the floor to push his electric-torch down into the darkness, and by the little gleam they could just make out some fragments of rotting woodwork. "Hope to God it isn't merely a covered-up well," said he as he withdrew the torch. "Made me feel a bit woozy-like when it started going. We'd better clear the rest of the earth out now."

He and Diwan Ali got to work, cautiously from the stone floor above, and presently in the enlarged cavity they could make out stonework below them, and, as they cleared the earth, realised that the hole was edged with masonry surrounding a shaft some three feet across. Then as Monocloid turned on his torch again, he saw in the darkness below the first steps of a flight of stone stairs.

"What is it?" asked Paul excitedly, as Monocloid lay there peering through his eyeglass into the gloom.

"Steps," replied Monocloid. "We've bumped on

the wine-cellar or the family vault or something in that line. Cunning birds. They laid a wooden trap-door across the opening, covered it with earth, and then put the stone back on top, hoping it would sound solid. Probably would have too if I hadn't just hit on that little hole where the earth had slipped. Spec's the wood-work bust when I got my pick into it, and that's what made it all sink in. Pretty antique, I should say. I don't fancy any one's been here of late. Well, we'd better get along and have a look. Going to let down a light first, though. The air won't be too good."

But the lighted piece of paper he dropped down burnt itself out quite naturally.

"Tell Diwan Ali to sit on guard in the door until we come back, and don't let any one in." Monocloid was half-way down the hole as he spoke.

Paul gave Diwan Ali his orders, and then followed down the flight of shallow steps. Fifteen feet or so below ground level he found himself on the floor of a narrow passage, with just clearance to stand upright and bare width for two men abreast, Monocloid's torch a couple of yards ahead throwing a circle of yellow light on the walls about them.

"What's in front?" he asked, craning over Monocloid's shoulder in his endeavours to see.

"More passage, dearie. Miles of it as far as I can see, which is about ten yards. I was looking at the stonework, but it seems good enough. Don't want to get buried before the flag falls, so to speak."

They pushed on slowly in the darkness, the passage trending downwards all the time, but running straight, and as they went they studied the masonry yard by yard looking for weak places. But the masons who built it had put their best work into it, and the blocks of the arched roof fitted as well as when they had first been set there.

They had gone perhaps two hundred yards and dropped a matter of fifty feet or more when Monocloid stopped, staring in front of him, and Paul, looking out

into the circle of light thrown by the torch, saw that the passage had widened into a sort of circular chamber fifteen or sixteen feet across. For a moment he thought they had come to the end, and looked around for any signs of mouldering chests in the niches of the walls. Then he realised that there were other passages—three of them—leading off the chamber.

“Wonder what this is for,” he said as they stood in the centre of the vaulted room with its low squat pillars void of any ornamentation, plain smooth blocks of stone.

“Secret council chamber of the Illuminati of the time probably,” said Monocloid. “Oubliette second turning on the left for a cert. Nothing here.” He swept the torch round. “Like a bit of a London tube, minus the advertisements and the moving stairway. Now then, which is it to be—right, left, or centre?”

“Keep to your right, according to the Bobby. Let’s try this one first.” Paul pointed up the right-hand passage. They followed it steeply downward for a matter of eighty or ninety feet, when it ended in a similar vaulted chamber, empty save for a curiously-shaped brass lamp hung from a hook in the roof, still black with the soot of a century and more ago.

Retracing their steps, they followed the centre passage, which also sloped downwards, only to end in smooth masonry of similar pattern to the walls. On either side of it were, however, arched recesses, which might have served as storehouses once upon a time, but which now held nothing save fragments of decaying cloth of what might once have been sacks.

The left-hand tunnel promised better as they followed it up a slight incline. In one place it opened off into a cell containing two iron-bound chests, the woodwork mouldering but still intact.

“Wonder if we’ve struck it at last,” said Paul as he bent over the chest trying to force the rusty hasp.

There was breathless silence as they strained at the lid, until finally Monocloid snapped the metal with the

point of the pick he was carrying, and they levered up the top, the rusty hinges complaining shrilly at this unwarranted interference after all these years.

There was a faint odour of perfume in the still heavy air as they threw back the lid, to find the chest packed with embroidered robes, and lying on top a short dagger with hilt of inlaid gold, the triangular blade somewhat rusty as they drew it from the sheath of mouldering velvet. But as they pulled out the silken garments, the heavy brocaded choghas and thick-embroidered shawls, the stuff came to pieces in their hands, dry as tinder after all these years.

"Gent's Sunday wardrobe," said Monocloid, holding up a brocade coat which split here and there as he unfolded it. "Anything worth having?"

"'Fraid not," replied Paul, as he turned out the last of the clothes. "We might get a museum to give us a life pass on the strength of the lot, and that's about all. Let's have a shot at the other."

But when they had forced open the second chest it proved to be empty, not even old papers, which would at least have been something to find. Paul picked up the dagger again and looked at it. "Nice bit of steel, anyway. I wonder who owned that?" He balanced the thing in his hand with the appreciation of one who knows something of armourer's work.

"Rajput, by the look of it," replied Monocloid. "Katar, isn't it? Simple form with single blade. Ever seen the kind with double blade that you squash open when you've pushed it through the other bloke's waistcoat? Well, we'd better get on."

But there was nothing further when they came to the end of the passage. The same masonry, the same dead end, not even niched recesses here. Somewhat despondently they made their way back to the central chamber and looked round it, hammered on the walls and on the floor in the hope of hearing the hollow sound that had revealed the stairs to them in the first instance. But in vain this time, for everywhere the masonry

gave forth the dead sound of stone backed by solid earth.

"I think a spot of lunch and some fresh air," said Paul at last. "I've had enough of this mining stunt for the day. I believe that if there ever was any treasure the cove who found the bit of jade supposed to have been under the big image has cleared off with it. Perhaps there never was any."

Diwan Ali, waiting for them at the entrance, inquired eagerly as to what they had found. Like all Indians, buried treasure was to his mind a natural concomitant of old palaces in a country where banks are of recent invention, and where even to-day some of the most enlightened would rather convert their wealth into good gold and silver, bury it under the floor and sit on it, than draw reasonable interest from the safest of Government investments, a country where the silver coinage disappears by millions sterling yearly from the Indian's longing to hoard.

But Monocloid was thoughtful all the afternoon, and when Paul, getting out his shot-gun, proposed that the afternoon might be spent in trying to shoot some rock-pigeon above the old cave temples, Monocloid refused to stir, settling himself in a camp-chair with Pierre Rivecourt's papers. He read and re-read them most of the evening, and when Paul came back he was still there half-asleep in his chair, with the much-thumbed writings on his knees.

They went to bed early that night, tired out after their day's work. Paul, however, was unable to get to sleep, and lay watching the sinking moon nearing the crest of the hill, above which showed the top of the Tower of Victory. After bagging half a dozen pigeon, which he had sent back to camp by Diwan Ali for dinner, he had wandered round the old temples, looking at the carved images and the rock-cut cells figured with men and beasts.

And somehow there woke again in him more than ever those feelings of the importance of things material,

of the insistence of the body, of the unreality of things other than those of flesh and blood, that had made life such torture to him in Waziristan. What was it hanging about the temples, which again to-day as on the first day he had visited them, had called up all those feelings—feelings he thought he had lost for good in the quiet peace of the little hospital at Tank? Was it that something of the men who had built them still clung to the place?—that deeds and thoughts of years long dead could still convey their impression to minds more sensitive than the ordinary run?—that the over-emphasis of man's physical part dwelt on hundreds of years ago by men toiling in the gloom of the rock below could still leave something like the veiled image on a photographic plate, ready to show up if only the right stimulus were applied, though the thoughts they portrayed, like the happenings caught on the film, were long ago buried in the limbo of the past?

That was one thing about Islam. It built its places of worship, clean and unadorned, in the sunlight, drawing men away from the material for a passing moment, and all its architecture spired upward towards the sky, arrow-like minarets and pointed domes all tending heavenward; whereas Hinduism seemed to lean to squat pillars, stunted and solid, flat roofs of caves darkened with soot of oil-lamps, seemed somehow to shun the sunlight, to avoid even the silver rays of the moon.

And at the thought of the images he had looked at came up the thought of Stella, very much the bodily Stella now, and all the old cravings took fire again with renewed force as he lay there wakeful in the still warm night. What would he do if she still clung to those ideals of hers, if Wednesday next, when he got back to Carlos' camp, saw her still determined to let happiness slide for the sake of futile illusions of a duty that was at best visionary?

There was but one thing to do, as all his hungry body told him. Use the power he had over her, use her longing for him that he could sense so well. Use that to

help him, and with the willing aid of the one Stella capture both for all time, smother Stella of the "thinks" under the weight of the feelings that he could so easily call up in Stella of the slumbrous eyes, if only he burnt those eyes with hot kisses, crushed her to him, and told her she must yield, if not for her sake then for his. Yes, it would be only too easy if he chose to. And he had every right to choose to. She was his, and he wanted her. That was quite enough. She was eternal woman, and he was man, and as man he had the power to take her. Nature had made woman so that man could take her, use her own blind feelings against her to make her willing to yield him what in her clearer moments she might refuse.

The moon sank over the hill, leaving the sky a darker background for the great stars that swung above. And with the darkness the turmoil in Paul's heart grew stronger as he lay there unable to sleep. Visions and pictures crowded through his mind: old racial memories, for they were no happenings that he had ever seen, or parts that he had ever played. And yet through them all the dominant figure was Stella of the grey eyes, Stella of the slim form, pictured now this way, now that, but always Stella.

Till finally, as the night wore on, he got up, and, lighting a cigarette, slipped on a pair of chaplis and walked about for a time letting the little breeze that had now sprung up play upon his hot face, trying to get his mind back to more reasonable thoughts, trying to catch again those vanished ideas, those pictures of Stella of the dawn, those moods when she had been all companion, when his mind and soul found in hers things of price infinitely beyond all her body could ever give him.

But he failed somehow to capture them again, and so finally went back to bed to drug himself to sleep with tobacco—heavy dreamless sleep of a mind outworn.

CHAPTER XXIII.

SUNLIGHT AND DUSK.

"THERE'S Taragurh, that big lone hill in front. And that's the Tower of Victory, the white needle-like thing on the top. You'll be able to see the walls soon. It's a wonderful place when you get there : some of the work looks as if it had only been built yesterday."

Frank Mainwaring, Marjorie's cousin, pointed out ahead as his ramshackle Ford clattered along in the fresh coolth of the early morning on the road from Carlos' camp towards Taragurh. He had come in from Khryabad to spend a couple of days with the Carlos, and his motor had been impressed to bring the party over to visit Paul and Monocloid for the day.

"Very deserted nowadays ; too far off the route even for globe-trotters. You get an occasional district officer on tour, or a forest bloke like myself, or perhaps a shikari like Carlos once in six months. Otherwise there isn't a white man visits it from year's end to year's end. Although, as a matter of fact, the last time I passed that way I found a wandering artist making what struck me as rather crude sketches of the place. Taciturn sort of cove, who didn't evince any desire for conversation, but seemed to like my whisky. Whoa, mare !"

He swerved the car to the very edge of the narrow rutted track in his effort to avoid a small herd of big slate-coloured buffaloes with china-blue eyes in charge of a ragged urchin.

He and Carlos were in front, with Marjorie and Stella

behind, and as he pointed out Taragurh, Stella craned her eyes for a view of the Tower which Paul had described to her, and somewhere in whose shadow he and Monocloid had pitched their tents. Paul had told Carlos something, though not all, of Monocloid's quest when he had been over the previous week, but to Frank Mainwaring they had said nothing except that Monocloid was an enthusiastic hunter of antiques, and was spending a couple of weeks in the fort in the hope of discovering some new carvings. As the forest officer did not know Monocloid, the story sounded natural enough.

Stella sat back in her seat again as Mainwaring threaded his way through the wild-looking beasts plunging to either side with snorts of alarm at this unaccustomed monster. Another half-hour would see them approaching the hill, and her mind was still as hopelessly undecided as it had been the day Paul left. Only three more days and then she would have to decide, for the thought of further delay never occurred to her. She had promised him an answer, and an answer he should have. But what it would be she still didn't know. Something perhaps hurriedly settled at the last possible moment if she continued in her present frame of mind—of utter inability to balance things out, to settle her ideas with any definiteness. Merely succession of shadows growing darker each day, the constant inward struggle between those two parts of herself, which seemed to her to be two distinct and definite persons holding diametrically opposite views.

Anyway, to-day perhaps she would get away from the shadows for an instant or so, just be with Paul in the sunlight, and not try to think of anything; a day of respite from blackness when she would wander the ruins with him, see those wonderful carved temples he had sketched for her with that vivid power of description that he possessed, that gift which always pleased her so much of making the past come to life, of noting the hundred little details that appealed to the imagina-

tive side of her, little details that other people seemed never to see.

The car bumped off the so-called road on to the Taragurh track, sun-dried mud-ruts inches deep, that nothing but a Ford could have negotiated ; and as they rattled up the incline the forest fell away from them, until at the foot of the hill, in the sunshine beating down on the rocky slope whence the main hill towered up in a succession of bare rock-faces, she saw two figures standing waiting for the car, Paul in shorts and stockings, khaki shirt and chaplis, waving to them. And at the mere sight of him waiting there longing came back a hundred-fold, and she wished—oh ! how she wished—that she and he were going to have that day to themselves in the sunlight, without even the Carlos or Monocloid anywhere near.

“ Diwan Ali’s come down to sit on the car in case you didn’t bring a man,” Paul explained as he helped Marjorie and Stella out. Monocloid’s still asleep, I think. He was up half the night with his bally papers and sketches.”

“ Which way up ? ” asked Carlos, lighting his pipe and looking up at the height above them. “ Must have been a toughish nut to take in the old days by the look of it. Stormed by the Mahrattas one time, didn’t you say ? ”

“ Probably got it by treachery,” replied Paul, possessing himself of Stella’s dustcoat. “ I don’t see how any one could get in otherwise, except by starving the place out. Unless, of course, they had the historic heaven-sent lizard.”

“ What’s the lizard game ? ” asked Marjorie. ¶

“ That was the way the Mahrattas say they took a fort at the beginning of Sivaji’s career when he started to clear the Muhammedan kinglets out of the Deccan. The place was absolutely precipitous, except just where the track ran in, and that was far too well guarded. But one fellow found one of the big Deccan lizards—things like small crocodiles—and sent it up the sheer

cliff with a rope tied on to it. When it got to the top it wedged itself into a crevice while the Mahratta storming-party swarmed up the rope, and the garrison woke to find their throats being cut quiet-like by people who seemed to have dropped from the sky."

"Yes; I've heard that story too," put in Mainwaring. "There's one of the Mahratta clans still who claim to be descended from the original owner of the lizard—call themselves 'Gharpuri,' which is the Deccan name for the big iguana. Probably the original fellow was a good climber and found a way up, and so they nicknamed him the lizard. Then later generations invented the more impressive yarn of the iguana specially sent by the gods to help them turn out the kine-killing Mussulman."

He and the Carlos were starting up the steep path as he spoke, barely room for two abreast, and so Stella and Paul found themselves behind. The climb was steep, and nobody talked much until the Khuni Darwaza came into sight round the bend at the top, a great sunlit arch of carved stone that broke upon them suddenly, stonework barred with vivid sunlight and madder shadows framing a vault of intense blue, and to either hand the great crumbling walls, with their little marble pavilions, their flame-shaped crenellations, the long straight shadows of matchlock slits and loopholes.

"Can't you picture that in the old days, Stella?" said Paul, stopping as the others passed through. "See a raiding-party riding out in mail, or the Nawab going out hunting with hawk on wrist?"

"Not a raiding-party to-day," said Stella. "I think it would be something more pleasant, like a gallop with his hawks. I wonder if he used to take his favourite queen, like Shahjehan did Nur Mahal? Do you remember the pictures in the Delhi Museum we saw on the way to Quetta?"

"Yes. Perhaps you're right. Can't you see them coming out of the gateway now? The old man on a chestnut stallion with crimson trappings, its head pulled

into its chest, and a bit about a foot long. See, he's got a steel bow inlaid with gold as well. And there's the lady too, on a grey mare, riding alongside with a make-believe veil just to keep the letter of the Prophet's law. She's got a bow too, thing light as a feather, to suit her tiny wrists. And look at the other people behind, the hook-nosed man in the mail shirt and spiked cap with the broad red belt and little shield. And that chap there with the bushy beard running alongside with a matchlock. Can't you see the smoke of his match ? " And Paul pointed to the empty gateway, where a little wavering breeze was blowing up a thin whisp of dust.

" You almost make me see them the way you talk," said Stella breathlessly, " and you know there's no one there at all really until you conjure them up out of nothing."

But as she laughingly protested at his words she wondered if he could conjure up other things for her too, make her see the things she longed for, make them alive and real, magic away the shadows that haunted her, turn her dreams into realities, make the past alive for her as she wished it had been, not as it really was ; take her with him into the land of delight, where one saw only the things one wanted to see, where dreams came true, and stones and dust turned to many-hued opals and pearls, as he changed before her eyes the broken stonework and the empty gateway to gleaming marble, and a portal filled with the figures of his imagining.

" Well, they *are* there still if you want to see them," said he, as they followed the others through the gate. " Everything's real if you really make it so, if you can only have the faith to call it up, as you said yourself ever so long ago at Aden. How many centuries ago was that, I wonder ? Or was it another life altogether ? "

" You're full of dreams to-day, Paul," said she, looking at him as they came out into the sunlight again.

" Why not ? I haven't slept too well of late, so I suppose I dream by day instead of night," he replied

quite seriously. "Also you've come to the palace of dreams. That's what Monocloid's cousin says was the name of the old palace here. And after all that's just where you ought to come to, isn't it, Dream Lady of the grey eyes? You've filled my dreams for months and months now, day and night, so there."

"I like to fill your dreams, Paul. That's what I always want to do; God forgive me, for I oughtn't to. But you've filled up something that's always been empty in me till I met you; you've become just the same one with whom I always think and feel, the same one who sees things in just the same way. Perhaps we're both dreamers."

"Yes, we are, Stella. But then we've got the sense to understand that dreams are the only really true things. They're the only things that really last, that don't get knocked to bits in a world of facts."

"Come on, you two!" Marjorie's voice brought them out of dreamland as they neared the tents, where Monocloid had hurriedly vanished to clothe himself respectably at the urgent appeals of Sayyid Ali, who had seen the party arriving. "Come along to earth and bacon and eggs. I'm famished!"

And by the time that Monocloid, new shaven and respectable, emerged, the party had gathered round the table for breakfast, a meal which they felt they had really earned after the drive.

"It's quite as wonderful as you make out, Frank," said Marjorie, accepting one of her cousin's proffered cigarettes and settling herself comfortably in a camp-chair after breakfast. "That gateway we came through reminds me of the big arch of the Kutb at Delhi, and the Tower of Victory seems a dream. Can we climb up inside, or isn't it safe?"

"Yes, I'll take you up presently. The people who built that built for all time. Not like our modern P.W.D.," said Mainwaring, lighting his pipe. "And later we'll go down and see the temples. They're nearly as good as the ones at Ellora. All carved clean out of the solid rock."

"Lot of squat-nosed godlets and overfed bulls, with an elephant or three suffering from too much ghi," put in Monocloid, nursing his bare knees. "But Merriman's the lad to show you round. He seems to know them all by name. Must have led a depraved life among Dravidian heathen."

But Paul was far keener to show Stella the wonderful tracery on the Tower of Victory, the fretted marble screenwork in the old palace, the tiled floor of the pavilion, whose trapdoor had been carefully replaced the night before, than to guide her through the dark little cells and the grotesque carving of the gloomy rock temples. The sunlit stone and the graceful arches of the Mussulman buildings would appeal to her far more than the older, cruder, more material Hindu work below the hill.

And as he guided the party over the palace, pointing out the little marble bath-chambers with their system of water aqueducts, the quaint balconies overhanging the outer wall, and the precipitous cliff of grey rock that dropped away sheer below their feet, he felt that his short descriptions brought the place again to life for Stella, even if not for the rest of the party. And when they stood in the topmost storey of the Tower of Victory, Stella clinging to his arm as she looked out over the giddy depths below, while Monocloid, dangling his legs over space, made twentieth-century remarks to Marjorie about reinforced concrete sky-scrapers, Paul felt once again what a large gap there was between Stella and him and the world around, even when the world was as pleasing as were the Carlos or as happy-go-lucky and joyously mad as Monocloid.

For, as he had said to her, for him and Stella life was so much a question of the things one felt, of the vivid appreciation of every kind of beauty that others so often passed by unseen, of that keen perception of the things that lay behind the visible, was in fact subjective, whereas to most people it seemed objective, to be weighed and measured and thought about only so

far as it could be reduced to concrete terms, limited, defined, and labelled by words that might be spoken or typed or printed. And some things can never never be reduced to the black-and-white of type, no matter how wondrously skilful the artist be.

But even if the others were objective they were thoroughly enthusiastic over the old buildings, more particularly Carlos, to whom old fortresses always appealed. He had remarks to offer about everything in the way of the defences, appraising this, discussing that, pointing out how little difference there is between war of to-day and war of the past centuries when you came down to the basic facts, comparing a flanking bastion with a flanking trench, pointing out the similarity between the lay-out of the citadel portion and that of a strong point he had built behind Neuve Chapelle, carrying on a heated argument with Mainwaring, who had been a temporary gunner all the war, as to the probable range of Qila Shikan.

But to Stella, as she listened to Paul's description of the casting of old guns, gleaned from some forgotten book read years before, the half-remembered details now crowding to his memory at the sight of the old bronze piece and the proximity of Stella, who always fired his mind, the interest of the thing lay not in its possibilities as a weapon, not in the engraving upon its breach, but in its associations with the past, the sights it must have witnessed, the hopes and fears, the emotions it had aroused in men and women long since dead. Men and women whose ashes lay now perhaps in the old mausoleums with the crumbling roofs that they had passed at the foot of the rock, tombs all unnamed, with just the carved pen-case to show that a man lay below, or the writing-board to mark the woman's resting-place—last differentiation between the active and passive components of life as we know it here, each incomplete without the other, neither able to say with truth that they alone are self-sufficient.

Lunch served under the big neem-trees was a cheerful

feast, Monocloid, egged on thereto by Marjorie, getting into anecdotal vein, and filling the conversation with half-true and wholly Homeric stories of the odd corners of the earth, lips pursed to whistle and eyes wideawake to see in the intervals how far his stories were being taken *au grand sérieux*.

It was indeed for them all a day in the sunlight, and as after lunch they wound their way down the steep little path to the cave temples, Stella felt that she was having surely that brief respite from the blackness that she wanted so much, just that chance to get away from her own mind, to think of nothing, just to take life as it was now without thought of to-morrow, or, worse still, of Wednesday, that must see her choose finally—choose between the hill paths that all her being craved for, risk the loss of her ideals and the chance that brief happiness might have to be paid for by subsequent years of regret, of that loss of her real self that she had visualised at Aden, choose between that and the long dusty road down the years, the lone trail with none to help, the road that perhaps led nowhere in the end.

But to Paul also it was in some sense a respite, since to-day he was content to think only of Stella as he had first come to love her: Stella of the ideals, of the perceptions that always went with his; Stella of the dreams and visions that he treasured so intensely; Stella on that finer plane of love which must precede, accompany, and in the end outlast all the other planes if love of man and woman is to be what it is surely meant to be.

“That’s where I found the artist cove,” said Mainwaring as they entered the temples. “Didn’t seem at all pleased to see me either. Wonder where he’s gone now?”

“Left a pile of cigarette-ends in that corner by the snake-armed gent,” said Monocloid, indicating the image of Shiv. “What was he like? Long hair? Absinthe? Remember one time before the war I ran into a colony of . . .”

The rest of the story was lost in Marjorie's demands to Paul to come and explain the meaning of the various carvings around the temples, and for the next hour he was busy employed in retailing such Hindu mythology as he could recall or extemporise.

The sun was sinking westward as they climbed the steep path up the hill again, to where in the long-shadowed evening light Monocloid's bearer had set out tea, and, pleasantly tired with their tramp, they sat and chatted for half an hour ere it was time to go down again to where Mainwaring's car waited in charge of Diwan Ali.

There were faint clouds above the western horizon, where the sun, a red-gold disc, was nearing the dark-shadowed tree-tops below them, faint clouds flecked with gold along their lower edges, splashes of pink on the blueness of the sky. And as they passed out of the shadows of the Khuni Darwaza into the golden evening glow beyond, Stella stopped to look at the sunset and the wonderful translucent colouring spread out before her. Paul stopped too, and in silence they feasted their eyes on the ever-changing sky before them. To both beauty in every form appealed, but in no form perhaps more than in the exquisite painting that unrolls for an all too brief space every evening and many a dawn for eyes that can see a little beyond the sheer material.

Moments when each felt even more drawn to the other than perhaps at any other time, despite the fact that for each life had come to mean at all times the companionship of the other, and that without that life meant nothing.

"Look, there's the sea," said Stella, pointing at a cloud-fringed bay of blue hung in the sky. "It's an island with a long bay running up between strips of sunlit sand."

"Running right up into the smoky forests on the island," replied Paul, catching her mood. "Palm-trees along the edge and a coral reef. Somewhere rather out of the world, I think ; perhaps the South Seas."

"Yes, right out of the world. Just somewhere that no one else knows of. And it is there, isn't it, quite real? Look at all those low cliffs along the beach and little blue creeks and sunlit channels running in between them with heather-coloured hillocks before you come to the high trees."

"We could run the boat right up under the trees there. And look at those long rocks running out into the sea. Topping place for bathing in the intervals of lazing in the sun." Paul spoke as if they were really going there, and though neither he nor she said another word, each felt that fate could hold nothing more desirable just then than the finding of that fairy island out beyond the western seas in the heart of the evening glow, just the island and one other who really understood, the other who stood there on the rough hill path on the grey stones, with Marjorie and Carlos, Monocloid and Mainwaring, disappearing out of sight below them.

Stella breathed a little sigh as they turned again to follow the rest of the party. Why did one have to follow people, be tied to motor-cars and meals, to a hundred maddening conventions of modern life? Why couldn't they get into a dream-ship, golden sails on an evening sea, listening to the soft ripple of the water as their barque headed for the island of Romance that seemed to lie only a few short miles away?

Still it had been a very perfect day, just a tiny respite from the blackness that had shadowed her of late. Come what might, she had secured one more milestone of Romance on the long road. Would it be the last? And the little evening breeze just springing up seemed suddenly cold, and the grey shadows below them where the others were assembling about the car strangely forbidding.

"Hope the lights work for once," said Mainwaring, fiddling with the switches. "We're later than I thought we would be."

"We can always toddle along about eight miles an

hour with a hurricane lamp at a pinch," replied Carlos. "I've done that before now in Paige's car coming home at Quetta."

Monocloid was taking exercise with the starting-handle and remarking on the excellence of Taragurh, in that there was two miles downhill before they reached the road, and she'd be bound to fire before the end of the incline. He always is an optimist.

"You'll meet me on Wednesday, Stella, won't you?" said Paul, as he helped her on with her coat. And as she looked at him while she tied her veil—the road was dusty—she could see the hunger in his eyes and the thought of what Wednesday might have to mean stabbed at her heart. How good he had been all day, given her just companionship without thought of himself, done nothing, said nothing, to make things harder for her, to use his power to help himself.

"Yes, I'll meet you," she said slowly. "And, Paul, think of me lots these next few days. I've got to hammer out things all alone in the shadows. Keep near to me, even though you're over here."

Monocloid's efforts were at last rewarded by the spitting buzz of the engine, and he straightened up as the lights glimmered into being, and with the purr of the engine, now firing regularly, covering her last words, Stella clambered into the car.

"Cheerio! See you Wednesday, Paul," called Carlos as the car slid forward down the incline away into the gathering shadows, and to Paul watching it go it seemed to him that it bore Stella from him, out of the sunlight they both craved so into shadows and darkness, where he and she had walked so often and where now for a space she must walk alone. And all his soul clamoured to go with her as he turned to join Monocloid and Diwan Ali on the narrow path.

But Stella did not know how dark those shadows would be until in the gathering dusk they nearly ran into a tonga heaped with kit, and as they pulled up with sudden jar of brakes the headlights fell on the face

of the white man sitting in it, who straightened up at the unexpected sight of a car near Taragurh.

"Hulloa! My artist friend, or I'm a Dutchman," said Mainwaring to Carlos as he accelerated again. "Wonder why he's come back? Should have thought he'd painted the whole place by now. Wonder what Monocloid and Merriman will make of him?"

But Stella, who had sat forward at Mainwaring's loud hoots as the tonga swayed round the turn in the very centre of the road and stared out into the bright circle of the headlights at the passing vehicle, had suddenly sat back again, her heart bumping madly at her ribs at the sight of the stranger's face, which, like Paul's words of the afternoon but in such different fashion, had suddenly called up the long dead past, brought back the years alive.

And it seemed to her then, as they slipped forward again after the momentary check to let the tonga pass, that the darkness of the past was as nothing compared to the utter blackness that came down upon her now suddenly like a veil.

". . . shifty short of cove, I thought. Don't like men with reddy-brown eyes . . ." Mainwaring's voice in front came faintly to her ears, and then her thoughts drowned all knowledge of their talk as, pleading a headache to Marjorie, she sat huddled back in her seat, her closed eyes dark shadows on the sudden paleness of her face.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CONTACT.

JACK TAYLOR sat on his camp-bed looking out with unshaven chin and heavy eyes at the dawn breaking over the forests, the rocky hillside about him, and the tumbled wall of Taragurh Fort grey in the first light of morning. The hand with which he lit his cigarette was not too steady, and there were shadows in his face and in his slightly bloodshot eyes, and he cursed his nerves as he noticed the trembling of his fingers.

He was tired after the long rail journey and the dreary dusty drive, rendered worse by the accident to the tonga bar, which had delayed him four hours by the roadside, while the driver had sought help from a village smith to mend the broken hook. The result of the accident had been a very late arrival at Taragurh and a camp pitched rather hastily in the dark, no dinner to speak of—not that he cared much for food these days,—and a sleepless night, rendered the more insupportable by the discovery that other Europeans had camped near by. A shooting-party, he imagined, dully wondering how long they would stay.

He looked around the untidy uncomfortable tent with growing disgust as he realised the change from the last weeks of such luxury as the East provides—scented and painted luxury it had been, for the most part—that had made large inroads on his small remaining capital, but luxury that had to some extent dulled his senses and brought something of oblivion to him. Yet, looking back, he cursed himself for a fool, cursed

himself for awakening desires that had had to be satisfied while there was still work on hand that must be got through.

And the future was nebulous in the extreme, unless within the next few weeks he could hit upon the secret of the treasure, find that carefully-concealed hiding-place, which even yet he was somehow sure existed.

He sat there smoking cigarette after cigarette, until in the full dawn-light his servant brought him tea and sodden toast of overnight. He swallowed a cup of the tasteless liquid, but the toast was too much for his palate, and he flung it, untasted, to a couple of hawks that circled about his tent. Then he got up and dressed, and impelled with the desire to get away from his tent, even if only for a space, took the path down to the temples, with the half-dread which always haunted him that perhaps these strangers whose camp-lights he had seen the previous evening might have somehow discovered the door in the temple. But he found it untouched, the accumulated wind-blown dust about the cracks showing clearly that none had entered recently.

He gazed around him at the carved figures, and there was a feeling of new distaste at the visionless faces, the impassive forms, the atmosphere of sensuality that somehow hung about some of them, repellent to the man who had recently had all the experiences he wanted in satisfying the material cravings engendered by hard living and solitude. He pushed open the secret door, and, turning on his torch, went on up the dark passage, with no very clear aim in his mind other than to revisit the tunnels where he had worked so long.

Meanwhile, on the hill above him, Paul, sitting up in bed drinking his morning tea after a rather late sleep, and occasionally envying Monocloid still deep in slumber, was wondering what Stella was doing, thinking how attractive it would be to wake up next Thursday in the comfort of Carlos' camp, have chota hazri under the

trees with Stella sitting opposite, the dawn-light in her eyes—Stella who by that time would have balanced out everything, got rid of the bogies, made up her mind to be sensible, to take and give all happiness. An unending vista of dawns with Stella ran through his mind as he sat there, until at last, coming back to actuality, he picked up an orange off the plate beside him and threw it at Monocloid, who grunted sleepily, brushed away the imaginary mosquito that had stirred him, and slept again. A second orange produced more effect, and Monocloid sat up, looked dreamily at Paul, settled his eyeglass in place, and poured out some tea.

“What’s the programme to-day, old bean?” said Paul.

“Nothing chiefly. Find out what exactly that other cove who arrived last night is doing. Wonder who he is and what he wants? If he’s a blinking globe-trotter he’ll be pottering round all day, and we don’t want him bumping on top of the trapdoor while you and I are emulating the merry sapper under the floor.”

Paul had forgotten for the moment the fact that a stranger had arrived the previous night, forgotten the lights outside the walls that had attracted their attention after dinner. Yes, undoubtedly it would be well to wait a bit until they were sure either that he had gone again or else was safely out of the way before they ventured underground once more. If there was anything to be found it would be better to find it on the quiet, and not come staggering out of the passage with a chest or two of bullion to run slap into the arms of a representative of the United States “doing” India in a fortnight.

But Sayyid Ali’s arrival disposed of the theory of the new-comer being one of Mr Cook’s clients. The Punjabi had been over to his camp, it seemed, and talked with his servants, discreetly explaining that his sahibs were there shooting jungle-fowl, which was partly true. He had ascertained that the new-comer had been there for nearly three months before, and was of that strange

genus of sahib which spends days and hours making pictures—God only knew what for.

“The bally artist—Man Friday, in other words. The plot thickens, as they say in the melodramas.” Monocloid’s lips pursed into a whistle. “Now what the hell does he want to paint in these ruins?”

“Earns his living by making daubs, I suppose. Anyway, we’d better find out his beat before we get to work again. If he sticks to the temples we shan’t see him much, which is all to the good.”

Paul rolled off his bed and made for his bath. Half an hour later, while Monocloid was still weighing up the advisability or otherwise of another hour’s sleep, fresh shaven and tubbed with Diwan Ali behind him, Paul, carrying his twelve-bore, wandered down the hill towards the temples in search of some rock-pigeon. The Punjabi flung stones into the open mouths of the caves, and Paul, on the ledge above, had a pretty twenty minutes at fluttering pigeon winging their way up out of the shadows into the sunlight.

When he had collected a round dozen, which would provide a reasonable meat ration for the camp, he was about to make his way up the hill—Diwan Ali carrying two bundles of the limp blue corpses, some of whose throats he had managed to cut before the last tremulous flutters had died away, thereby satisfying his Mussulman conscience that they had been slain in fashion fit to make them lawful food for the faithful, to wit, himself and Sayyid Ali and the two servants—when from the caves below a white man emerged.

“Man Friday afoot early,” thought Paul as he emptied his gun and put the cartridges back into his shirt-pocket. “Wonder if he’s going to claim acquaintance?”

The stranger looked up at where Paul stood twenty feet above the entrance, stayed as though about to hail him, thought better of it apparently, and made off along the winding track that led up the hill on the farther side. “Unsociable blighter!” thought Paul, as he turned up the hill towards their camp, where he

found Monocloid dressed at last, waiting for breakfast, which his bearer was just bringing, a Monocloid apparently deep in thought, punctuating his meal with glances at a bundle of papers which Paul had learnt to know well by now.

“What are you looking for in the manuscript?” asked Paul finally, as he filled his pipe after breakfast. “I thought you knew that thing by heart now. You’ve surely had all the meat out of it, haven’t you?”

Monocloid ignored his remarks, and sat there reading, whistling dolorously from time to time. Paul ventured another remark to the same effect as the last, and then Brown condescended to listen to him as he folded up the papers.

“Looking for, dearie? Mr Pierre enthralls my severely logical mind with his fantastic description of pre-Aryan customs. The idea of a Nordic mind filling itself with such piffle is a dreadful thought, and shows how a race can disintegrate under the effect of unsuitable climatic conditions. At least that’s what occurred to me at first. But my respect for the Frenchman has returned a little now. Listen to this, a note evidently added at a later date.

“‘A sign that is always much in evidence on temples, wayside shrines, and other buildings, even upon house-doors, which the owners desire to place under special protection’—a cunnin’ bird, Rivecourt,—‘is the three-pronged trident of Vishnu. Sometimes the prongs are plain, sometimes embellished with ornamentation. One sees them’—great use the French make of the indefinite impersonal—‘everywhere in certain districts, in caste marks upon the shaven intellectual brows of the Brahmans’—why in blazes can’t the French spell Oriental words phonetically?—‘upon the walls of shrines and temples, sometimes forming the main design of a building somewhat as in Christian architecture the cross is the ground-plan of many a cathedral. Painted in vivid colours upon the white plaster, cut into the dark living rock, made into bronze and brass ornaments. One

example I saw several times under circumstances that have imprinted it upon my memory, whereof one prong was again marked with miniature replicas of the main design.' ”

“All very interesting, but what is it? He's got just as platitudinous bits in other parts. What was the code reading of that bit?” asked Paul.

“That is where the jest comes in. There wasn't any. The number system went horrid west when I got there. I spent days that might have been passed in peaceful sleep trying to work it out. Finally chucked it and went on with the next bit. I wonder if poor old Fifi was had for a mug the same way too, or whether he saw through his maternal ancestor. Probably he didn't, since he couldn't have guessed it without seeing the place. I shouldn't have.”

“Seeing what place? I haven't noticed a single trident since I've been here. I don't think there are any Vishnavites here. It's all Shiv in this locality.”

“There you are. Shows what a keen student of human nature old Rivecourt must have been. If you want to hide something really decently, put it where any bally fool ought to spot it first go-off, and the odds are they'll never see it. Like the thimble on the gas-bracket. Must admit that he had me for a bit.”

“For the Lord's sake talk sense if you really have hit on something. What does the paper mean, and where's the trident he refers to?”

“In the passage, of course.”

“I never saw any trident. Cut in the stonework, was it?”

“The passage itself is a three-pronged animal, isn't it, you owl? And if one passage at the end has a few tridentlets scratched on the wall or drawn by the languishing prisoner with a rusty nail and the last drops of his heart's blood what time the cruel tyrant above was makin' merry with the prisoner's girl, same like in the stories the British and American publics love so, you can bet your last shirt that we're within call of

the boodle. We'll go look-see first thing to-morrow morning if we can ensure Man Friday being out of the way. Too easy if you only bring a cool brain to bear on it."

"You're an ingenious soul when the spirit moves you to exercise what you're pleased to call your 'severely logical mind,' I must admit. I suppose it's the rarity of the occasions when it's exercised that makes it so energetic when you do get a move on. . . . Pax! I've got my fingers crossed."

Monocloid refrained from more serious action than pitching a squashy banana in the scoffer's direction, and reverted to the subject of the artist.

"We'd better find out what he's painting at present. If he's getting inspirations from the temples, that ought to ensure his being well out of the way most of the day. Sayyid Ali can shadow his camp unostentatiously, find out when he's going off, and watch for his return, while Diwan Ali occupies the pavilion entrance, with a tent-paulin spread over the hole. What was he at this morning when you saw him?"

"Nothing, as far as I noticed; just taking the air by the look of him. He didn't seem to have any painting gear at all, and had no one with him."

"I'm going to try and get in touch with him presently, and find out what he's like. He's going to stop here for some time presumably, judging by what his servant told Sayyid Ali. If he goes down to the temples this afternoon I'll follow him, and see what he's at."

But as a matter of fact it was Paul who ran into him again later in the morning, ran into him on a narrow path under the walls where Paul had gone with his glasses to see if he could make out the site of Carlos' camp and the little hill that held such very dear memories, and would, he was sure, hold such still dearer ones in three days' time. The path was narrow there, with a steep slope below, and a steeper rise above to the foot of the walls, so that they could not avoid each other.

"Morning," said Paul as they halted, each waiting

for the other to make way. "Think I saw you in the temples this morning when I was shooting rock-pigeon. Hope I didn't drop any on your head." He wanted to make Man Friday talk. The man could hardly refuse to, since, unless Paul made way for him to pass, he had no alternative but to turn back to the wider space behind and wait for Paul to cross the narrow part.

"No, you didn't. I was well inside when I heard your shots. Making a sketch of one of the carvings." He spoke rather defensively, Paul thought. Also he wondered what the sketch was made on, since the man had been in shirt-sleeves and carried no painting materials. He had the same rough khaki shirt on now, and the pockets were not big enough to take anything more than a cigarette-case. Not too truthful, it seemed. But Paul followed up the opening.

"Are you an artist? We heard there'd been one here before we came. Rather fascinating place to sketch, I should think, those old marble-fronted buildings in the sunlight. Is this the first time you've been here?"

"No. I've been here some little time off and on. There's been no other fellow here that I know of recently."

"Oh, then presumably you're the man they told us of."

"Who told you?" The quick question was in a tone that to Paul's receptive mind showed something of suspicion. He wondered whether to say it was Mainwaring or not; decided it was simpler to say so. Probably the fellow must have met the car on the way back.

"One or two of the coolies who brought our kit up and a friend who was up here for the day yesterday—a forest officer. I think you met him once when he came here on tour. At least he said he met an artist painting here, a man called Taylor, and you say that you haven't seen any one else about."

"Yes, that's me." The man's face cleared again. Paul took out his cigarette-case and offered it to Taylor, who accepted one. As Paul held out the match he noticed the slight trembling of the fingers, the rather bloodshot eyes, as the man bent his head down to light

his cigarette at the match Paul shielded in his curved hands. "Been overdoing it a bit of late by the look of him," he thought. "Wonder what—drink? drugs?"

"What are you working at now?" he asked, as the man straightened up again. "Pictures of the temples? They would make rather good subjects, but the lighting is difficult, I should say. What is your line? Oils or water?"

"Water chiefly," replied Taylor. Evidently Paul was a perfectly harmless type of soldier on leave, with no particular tendency to inquire about other people, except in so far as it helped casual conversation. All the same, he would be glad to see the back of him and his friend, whoever they were, for they were decidedly in the way. "Do you paint at all?"

"No," said Paul. "We're just shooting round here and having a look at the old ruins in the meantime. It's a central sort of spot to work from."

"On leave, I suppose," said Taylor. The man opposite to him was obviously a soldier.

"Yes, just down here for six or seven weeks. Rather lucky getting leave in the cold weather like this. Doesn't often come the way of the soldier man."

"Going to stay here all the time?" Again there was the faintest nuance of anxiety in Taylor's speech, though he sought to conceal it. Another than Paul might have missed it, but he was interested in Man Friday, as he called Taylor mentally. The thought behind the words Paul read as rather, "Hope you're not going to stop long."

"Don't quite know yet. Probably not. Personally I'm off for a few days on Wednesday. Stopping with some friends who are in camp farther on towards Khyrabad. You may have passed their car last night. They left shortly before you came."

"D—— nearly ran into them. Tonga ponies here aren't accustomed to cars. The shooting towards Khyrabad is much better than round here." Taylor remembered Mainwaring saying so. And again Paul felt that

what Taylor would really have said was, "You'd much better shift camp and join your friends." The man was rather an enigma. He clearly didn't want to be friendly, and at the same time did not want to appear as if he didn't. Paul wondered again. Then he stepped off the path to let the other pass if he wished to.

"Come and look us up some time if you've nothing better to do. We've got a whisky worth sampling. Merriman's my name."

"Thanks," said Taylor. "I'll drop in this evening perhaps. I must get on with my work this afternoon. So long."

Paul stood there watching him go, and wondering at the back of his mind who and what the man was, and whether his pictures were really all that brought him to Taragurh. But when he returned and described the meeting, mentioning the name, Monocloid became thoughtful.

"I wonder if he will come round after all. I don't believe any one would want to spend three months here sketching. Perhaps he's wanted by the police somewhere and is lying doggo. Name's common enough, but somewhere at the back of my mind I seem to feel that it hangs on a misremembered peg."

Taylor did, however, arrive after tea, and they sat out in the open under the trees with the whisky which, as Paul said, was worth sampling. He seemed a little less diffident under the influence of the whisky, and talked of himself occasionally. For lack of better subjects they drifted back to the war years, and Taylor mentioned he had been with the East African Expeditionary Force.

"Indian Army Reserve?" queried Monocloid, as though the question was of no particular interest and merely said for something to say. But his mind was moving fast now. The name was familiar, and he was sure it was there just behind the back of his thoughts, intangible, elusive, but keyed to something he could not quite catch.

"South African infantry," replied Taylor. "Were you out there?"

"No, thank the Lord!" said Monocloid. "Dud sort of front from all accounts. *Ad lib.* kicks and no bally ha'pence." What the devil was the connection between the name Taylor and the East African front? Suddenly he caught it, and his eyes went even more dreamy as he visualised himself back in the depot of a hot-weather evening in the stuffy little office going through Fifi Carter's kit, reading the neatly-written list signed "J. N. Taylor." That was it! Now what the devil brought the man here of all places? And how was it they had not found Gopal Tiwari's piece of jade?

He thought of asking whether Taylor had met the battalion of his regiment with which Fifi had been, then thought better of it. If there was anything it were wiser not to awake suspicion. Taylor would be easier to watch if he did not suspect. And when Taylor asked him what his regiment was, he very deliberately gave the name of one he had been with during the Afghan War, thankful that his tent and camp kit happened to be marked still with its number instead of that of his own unit.

But it was just as Taylor was leaving that Monocloid glimpsed something which made him feel that he was on the right track, although he could nowise understand how. He was not listening closely to the conversation between Paul and Taylor, and the former addressed a remark to him which he did not catch. Paul repeated it, adding his name "Monocloid" to attract his attention.

And then Monocloid, watching Taylor under sleepy eyelids, saw the sudden snap in the man's eyes, the nervous start that swept his empty glass off his chair arm where he had balanced it. Amid the profuse apologies wherewith Taylor covered his carelessness, Monocloid could see that the man was alarmed, suddenly awake to something that he had not hitherto realised, grasped a new attitude of hostility which persisted until he left them.

But once he was safely out of sight Monocloid turned to Paul, and his eyes were no longer sleepy but blazing with excitement.

"We've got to get a move on quick, Merriboy, and what's more, we're got to keep an eye on Master Taylor. There's something a good deal more than pictures that keeps him here. I've got on the track of it now. 'Taylor' was the name of the man who picked up Fifi Carter and packed his kit—and buried him. Buried his bit of jade, too, according to the list."

"Do you mean this is the same bloke?" Paul asked, astonished. "But how the devil could he have found out anything? Fifi wouldn't have told him, and we've got the papers. One bit of jade alone would be no good."

"True. But we don't know all the yarn. Fifi may have had other papers which this chap's got. Perhaps Fifi had worked out the code and kept a translation of it, though it's not likely. But did you see the way he started when you called me 'Monocloid,' and the state of him after? We know he was in East Africa and that his name is Taylor, and that he was with the South African infantry. I remember now that the man who signed the list of Fifi's kit was 'J. N. Taylor, captain, South African infantry'—I forget which battalion. Why the devil he should jump at hearing my name I don't know, unless possibly he found it among Fifi's things. He used to write to me about once a year or thereabouts, and he may have had an unposted letter on him which this chap read."

"Well, what are we going to do? Tackle him about it?"

"No damned good. He'd only lie, of course. I'd like to loot his camp and see what he's got there, but we can't very well do that. Wish I had an honest Afridi with me, who could go through his kit to-night for us. No; what we'd better do is to see him out of the way to-morrow, and hurry up with our own search. He hasn't found the place or he'd have left here. He'll

paint hard for the next day or two to put us off the scent. You can see he's suspicious now. It's lucky he's doing something in the temple; it'll keep him out of our way. But I wonder what the devil he's found there. I'll bet if we raided his camp we'd find both Fifi and Gopal's chunks of jade. I wonder if there's anything else in the temple beside that little place under the idol. But the MS. says nothing about it, although he may have other papers."

"Well, even if there is we can't butt in straight away now with him working there. We can watch his camp, and see if he shows any signs of making a move. In the meantime there's your theory about the trident and the three-armed passage which wants looking into. What about trying to-night?"

"Not good enough. He'll quite likely come sneaking round if he suspects anything to see if we're working at night. No, we'll make much talk of going to shoot jungle-fowl to-morrow in case his servants come round. He's pretty sure to go down to the temples, since he's committed himself to that story to you. That'll give us a few hours to work in, any way. We'll kick off past his camp very ostentatious first thing in the morning, just taking Diwan Ali and guns. Then we'll scurry round the hill and come up the other side to the pavilion, which is out of sight of both camps. I'll dump the kit before dawn close by and hide it. We'll want the crow-bar and a couple of picks, and lights and things like that."

Next morning, after Monocloid and Sayyid Ali had crawled out in the darkness and hidden the tools near the summer-house, Paul and Monocloid, with Diwan Ali, passed Taylor's camp, where he was sitting up in bed having chota hazri. Despite his somewhat hostile attitude, they passed the time of day, announcing that they were going after jungle-fowl, and would probably not be back till late, but they hoped he would come in and have a bukh before dinner. It was well done, and Taylor's half-formed suspicions were somewhat

allayed. Whatever they were after they did not seem to suspect him. Perhaps it was only chance that "Monocloid," whom Carter had mentioned in his delirium, had come here. He didn't look very interested when Taylor had talked of East Africa. Perhaps it wasn't the same man, though the nickname was most unusual. Anyway, they seemed to be out of the way for the day, and he had better get to work quickly in case anything was wrong.

Meanwhile Paul and Monocloid were off hot-foot round the hill, finally coming up on the farther side, and working their way under cover to where Sayyid Ali was awaiting them near the pavilion with the welcome news that the other sahib had gone down to the cave temples carrying various paraphernalia such as picture-making sahibs delighted in.

Twenty minutes later the trapdoor was open, and, leaving Sayyid Ali on guard under cover, the three of them slipped down the long dark passage towards the central chamber where the three arms took off.

CHAPTER XXV.

INTERVENTION.

AN hour after Paul and Monocloid had passed his camp, Taylor, with a portfolio of sketching materials, camp-stool, and portable easel, entered the cave temples. But he had no idea of painting that morning for all that he had brought his sketching things with him as a screen should any one have noticed him on the way down. The fear that the new arrivals might be in some way connected with Fifi Carter haunted his every moment, forced him on to action at once, lest while he waited they might discover the treasure, or realise that he was searching for something, even if as yet they themselves were ignorant of its existence.

During the sleepless hours of the night there had come up again all unbidden the picture of the little camp at Kissimane where he had sat by Carter's bedside, heard the feeble broken voice giving away the dying man's secrets, listened to his words to the unknown Monocloid. And now here was a man whose friend addressed him as "Monocloid," a man who said that he had come to Taragurh to shoot, when, as far as Taylor knew, there was far better shooting to be had farther along the jungle road to Khyrabad. Surely it was something more than coincidence. Was it avenging Fate dogging his footsteps with relentless tread to thwart him in the end, to stop him finding those riches for the hope of which he had robbed Carter's dead body? The devils of depression hung about his mind as he made his way into the bat-haunted gloom past the staring

images, which seemed to-day instinct with life, seemed to watch him as he passed, watch him with those dead eyes of which Carter had spoken.

He must hurry now, for every moment might prove to be precious. Once again he must sound the walls of the passage, discover where the hidden chamber lay, make amends for those wasted weeks of his. What a fool he had been ever to leave Taragurh, to risk so much, and now, as it seemed to his panic-stricken imagination—although he had nothing in reality whereon to base his fears,—to have left the road open to these seemingly simple soldiers.

God ! Suppose while he had been away they had discovered the hiding-place—their apparent friendliness merely a mockery. Perhaps the treasure was already gone ! Perhaps that car he had passed the first night was taking it away, while they stayed on shooting as a blind. They would send it away by night naturally, and a car would be so simple. No need to take tonga-drivers into confidence, display to all and sundry various mysterious packages that had not been there when they arrived.

He had mistrusted that forest officer, Mainwaring, when he had first visited the fort. He had seemed so curious, so interested in some one whose reason for camping here was to paint pictures of the ruins. Looking back, Taylor seemed to note an air of incredulity in Mainwaring's remarks. And ever the picture of Fifi Carter came back to him, the memory of the unseen girl he had spoken to as he died. Perhaps she was working against him somehow or other. Yes, there had been a woman—half seen—in that car !

As he reached the great image, and looking around to see that no one else was near, slid back the stone of the door, his foreboding grew more gloomy, his imagination played tricks with him, the image seemed unaccountably malevolent, the giant image that not so long ago had been to him mere lifeless stone, a meaningless idol of a forgotten age. He slid the door to behind him, deposited his sketching materials, and with the

sweat of excitement upon his brow went up the narrow vaulted passage dimly lit by the light of the electric torch. He would light the lantern, which with his tools had been left inside, later on; for the moment the torch would serve.

All the way back to Taragurh he had wondered where he should start work again, gone over the passage time after time in his mind, weighed the chances of this or that point, pondered where he would have hidden the treasure had he been Badulla, convinced always that the passage he had found was the identical one out of all the many that honeycombed the rock wherein Pierre Rivecourt had worked with Mahmud Hussein and Gopal Tiwari under the Nawab's guidance.

And more and more strongly the impression came to him that somewhere in the curious dip by the little idol he would find that which he sought. To-day, as he hurried along, his footfalls sounding dully on the stone floor in the dark heavy silence, he was more than ever convinced that the end of his quest would come somewhere near that grotesque carving.

When he arrived there he stopped and laid down his tools, considering where he should commence. He had sounded the walls around without finding any part that seemed in any way to indicate a walled-up chamber or any place that might be hollow. No answering echo had repaid his blows upon the stonework, no change from the dull heavy sound of solid earth. The little image leered at him in the faint light of the torch, its halo of widespread arms snake-like about its slim form, perhaps three feet high; the thin-lipped mouth seemed to conceal the knowledge that the eyes had surely gleaned. Somehow he disliked that image more than the others outside, there was something so coldly cruel about it. The one outside was merely impassive, unapproachable to prayer or supplication, crushing the figures below it without seeming notice. This one appeared somehow to take deliberate pleasure in destroying the life under its feet.

Taylor swore at himself for being a fool, wondered what had happened to him that his imagination should run riot in this unaccountable way, that he should begin to fear lifeless idols, he who had worked day after day alone in these grave-like passages with their uncanny silence.

He turned to the wall opposite, and his heart leaped as he saw that the stonework had slipped. Were his fears justified after all? Then his nerves steadied again as he realised that it was merely that the masonry had crumbled a little, that one of the lower blocks had slid an inch or two, possibly from damp. Still it was disquieting, since hitherto he had always considered this part of the passage as absolutely safe, though in other parts he had already had one or two narrow escapes from crumbling stonework ready to fall at the least vibration after its years of disuse.

Then as he bent more closely to examine the wall he suddenly stayed still and tense. Was his brain really going? The sweat stood out again on his brow as he listened to what at first thought seemed surely some figment of his jangled nerves. For as he listened, every nerve taut, on the dead silence of the passage there seemed to come to him faint whispers, muffled sound of voices far away, far away in the heart of the wall, indistinct and uncertain, sometimes louder, sometimes softer, now nearer, now farther away.

Then once again he got control of himself, slipped back the button of the torch, and stood stock-still in the sudden darkness, ear close to the masonry. Yes; voices beyond a doubt. And then as his eyes grew more accustomed to the darkness he realised that only a few inches from where he stood—just by that newly-slipped stone—was the least little glimmer of light in the wall, the faintest yellow crack on the velvet darkness, a hairline of diffused light perhaps two inches long.

He moved closer to put his eye to the crack thus revealed, but could see nothing. But the voices came more distinctly now, though he was still unable to

catch the words. Then presently the light died away, and the voices hushed to silence. Taylor straightened up. There could surely be no doubt. Some one was there on the other side of the wall, where, all unknown to him hitherto, there was clearly another passage. And to his mind, already obsessed with the fear that he might be forestalled, with this new dread that the two men whom he had seen that morning and talked with last night were bound on the same errand as himself, a dread superstitiously connected with the memory of Carter, there could be no doubt that the people on the farther side were Merriman and Monocloid.

He stayed awhile listening, but no further sound came to his ears nor any gleam of light to his eyes. They had clearly gone on. He pondered for a minute or two as to what he should do. Leave the passage, and try to ascertain where they had entered it? But they would be too careful to let him see that. Doubtless, even while they were underground, one or other of the two sepoys they had with them would be on guard above. He waited for nearly half an hour to ascertain if there was any more to be heard or seen.

Then as the unbroken silence and darkness convinced him that they had gone, he lit the lamp he carried, and, screening it carefully so that the light should not fall directly upon the wall, he picked up his crowbar, and as quietly as he could set to work to prise out the stones at the foot. He worked for half an hour, and then his crowbar broke through the disintegrating mortar. Slightly enlarging the hole, he listened carefully, but still no sound came to his ears. Clearly they had left the passage or chamber, or whatever lay upon the other side.

His hands trembled with excitement as he set to work once more, levering out the rough-hewn stones with infinite caution, careful not to dislodge any large blocks, his shirt, which he stripped off to work, ready at hand to shove into the opening should the least sound be heard. At last there gaped before him a small hole in

the masonry, perhaps eighteen inches across, and upon the far side what appeared to be a tunnel not dissimilar to the one he himself was in.

Then, extinguishing his lamp and with his electric torch in his hand, he wormed his way through the hole into the passage on the far side. He lay listening intently, and down from the right there came to him faint and far off the steady muffled "tap—tap—tap—tap" of metal on stone. It was clear as daylight now that they were working on the same quest, that all their talk of shooting had been a mere blind. He stood up and turned on his torch. Since he could see no light ahead it was evident that they were not in this gallery where he stood, or else well round a curve, so that there could be no danger in having a glance about him with the light.

Then as he swept the circle of light around him he realised that he stood in a passage not unlike the one he had left, a passage which ended a couple of yards to his left in a dead face of masonry, and to his right continued slightly downwards in the gloom. He muffled the torch with his handkerchief so as to give only the faintest glimmer on the floor in case of holes, and crept along silently, until he found himself in a circular chamber with the sound of the distant blows coming clearer to his ears every step he took. He followed the wall of the chamber, and became aware of another passage opening off it, a passage down which the sound of blows came loud and clear, and at whose far end as he looked down its incline was a glow of yellow light and dimly-seen figures.

The blows stopped an instant, and along the tunnel towards him echoed a voice—muffled in the close air, but distinct enough for Taylor's ears—"We've got it, Monocloid!" And then something seemed to snap in Taylor's brain as he understood that he had lost, and for one mad instant he meditated creeping down the passage under cover of the noise of the work which had recommenced, and bursting on the unsuspecting workers

with the short pick he carried. Then the clearer calculating light of madness swept over his mind, and he retraced his steps the way he had come, and as he walked his mouth was like that of a fiend.

He reached the end of the short passage where he had first broken in from his own and looked around. Yes, there was no mistaking the fact that the thing was an absolute dead end. Obviously the time he had heard the others talking and seen their light, they had been exploring this arm, and finding it led nowhere retraced their way to the chamber to explore another branch. That meant that he was reasonably safe from interruption here. He looked back down the tunnel, and saw that the ground sloped quite definitely from him towards the chamber he had left, and from there the incline towards the point where Monocloid and company were at work was slightly more pronounced. Then he pushed his way through the hole into his own passage, and, leaving his tools, went back down the gentle incline to the temple as fast as he could go, laughing quietly to himself as he went, a laugh that was half a snarl and with eyes that held no laughter at all, only the cunning gleam of the mind on the border-line of madness.

He ran up to his tents, thankful to find that his servant was away, probably down below the hill getting eggs and other kitchen supplies from the tiny village which nestled at the foot. From a trunk he extracted a small round tin of detonators and a coil of fuze, and from a little wooden packing-case he took out a dozen dynamite cartridges, brought with him in case he might find it necessary to blast away the stonework should the settling of heavy blocks have entirely closed any of the passages. So far he had not had to use it, never meeting any obstruction that could not be cleared with crow or pick and shovel.

Then still smiling to himself he returned to the temple, entered the tunnel, this time leaving the door just open behind him, and stopped again at the small image in the

dip in the passage. Once more he wormed his way through the hole he had made into the next tunnel and listened. They were still busy, for he could hear the noise of the tools on the stonework, muffled and dead in the distance. Satisfied on this point, he withdrew into his own tunnel, drove a small hole in the crumbling masonry that divided the two passages, and packed in a charge of dynamite. The point where he had broken through was the thinnest part of the wall; to either hand the passages diverged again rapidly. Perhaps at some time there had been a connection there, walled up later, but it had been done with considerable skill, for on neither side was there any interruption in the masonry courses, nothing to show that the wall was not continuous and solid. Only the accident of the disintegrating mortar, the slipping stone leaving just the tiniest of chinks, and the chance of his being there just when the others were talking on the farther side, had given him the knowledge that they were actually at work.

Well, now he would profit by their labours. What had sent that berserk mood over him as he had heard Paul's exclamation which told him that they had forestalled him? Had he yielded to it, even if his quick sudden onslaught upon them had enabled him to settle with them all unprepared, what would he have done next? Corpses are messy things at best.

But now it was all so easy. They had looked like rats in a hole, working there in the dim circle of their lamp. Rats they were, and like rats in a hole he would drown them. No troublesome explanations to invent. Then next day he would go to their camp, and, of course, by then the servants would have to reveal the fact that their masters had not returned, and perhaps the man on guard—he was sure they would have a man on guard at the other end—would have tried to help them, or entered the passage himself, and so Taylor would find the other entrance that they must have stumbled on. Afterwards, when their men had gone, he could slip

into the passage, clear out the water by degrees, and gather up the spoil.

So he reflected with his clouded mind as leaving the image he pushed on up the tunnel to where the slimy slabs above his head marked the bottom of the great tanks. He had never fathomed the machinery which controlled the stones; possibly the woodwork had long ago rotted away, leaving the slabs bedded in place. But a judiciously-placed charge of explosive would tear the stones apart, probably hopelessly shattering one if not both of them, and the weight of water above should do the rest.

Once again he fitted fuze to detonator, crimping in the end with his teeth in miner's fashion, pressed the detonator into the centre of a cartridge, and later, after breaking a small hole in the edge of one of the two great slabs above, packed the charge in, the black fuze hanging down snake-like. He had calculated carefully the time he would require to get back to the junction of the passages, the time necessary to fire the fuze there, and adjusted the length of the fuze for the tank charge to allow him time.

The others might or might not hear this explode; they were some distance away and round two corners. But they were bound to hear the explosion of the second charge, which would tear down the dividing-wall between the passages, leaving a path for the water, as it reached the incline beyond the image and filled the dip, to pour into their tunnel down the incline, and, cutting them off, drown them like trapped rats. Taylor chuckled at the thought as he prepared to light the fuze, one match-head pressed into the slanting cut he had made across the end of it, another ready to light the first one, or rather to flash the composition into the powder of the fuze.

They would be very limp when he fished them out later on. He hoped drowning was a painful death; he would like to feel it was not too easy for them after the way they had nearly baulked him. Had he not been

there this morning he might never have known. They might have collected the treasure and left Taragurh before he had even realised that they were searching. Then he lit the fuze, and as the little shoot of sparks and the spitting smoke from the slightly-twisting fuze, suddenly alive, told him that it was burning well, he turned and ran down the passage as fast as he could go until he reached the place where his second charge was laid and the little fuze, cut as short as he dared risk, projected from the wall. He gathered up his shirt; he had already placed his other possessions up the incline on the farther side where the passage sloped down again to the temple. The water ought not to come beyond that point, provided his charge here worked and broke a way for it into the other tunnel. In fact his scheme depended on that happening, for otherwise it would merely drain out at the far end in the temples, and what was more, he would have to race for his life in front of it.

Then far up the passage came a dull crash, and Taylor struck the match he held pressed to the bare two inches or so of fuze. The shaking crack and roar of the explosion beyond was followed by a movement in the close air about him as he stood there lighting the fuze, a movement that quickened to a close warm wind as the waters poured into the passage, driving the confined air before them. The dark tunnel in front of him filled with the rushing sound of the hurrying waters, and then Taylor realised as he stood there at the bottom of the dip sloping up either side of him that either from the dampness of the match or of the powder itself the piece of fuze he held had failed to light. With an oath he tried once more, failed again, heard the rushing waters draw closer, struck three matches together and fired them, thought the fuze lit, and looking up the incline beyond whence the warm wind poured down upon him, fancied he saw the advancing stream, and turned to fly back towards the temple end to wait the welcome crash of his second charge.

But as he turned to fly his foot caught in something that felt to him like a hand clutching at his ankle, and he smashed forward on his face. It was a sharp knob of rock that took him on the left temple as he hit the ground, and though the torch he carried did not go out with the fall, lying a couple of feet ahead of him, a little bead of light in the gloom, the darkness had already closed about Taylor for a space as he lay there face down, with the little trickle of sticky blood soaking into the ground below his head. And the faint glimmer of the torch on the floor showed the pickaxe he had forgotten to take up, the end of it wedged into a crevice under the feet of the impassive image, and the arm of its short heavy head hooked about Taylor's left ankle.

The beam of the torch fell also upon the face of Shiva, and if any one had been there—deceived by the play of the shadows, for the torch was burning rather intermittently as a running-down battery sometimes does,—they might have said that the figure smiled as it stared across over Taylor's unconscious form to where in the opposite wall the inch or so of his fuze still showed black and lifeless against the stonework.

But they would have had little time to study the picture, for within five seconds of Taylor's fall the torch showed a wall of black water slipping down the incline towards them, filling up the dip where Taylor lay. Then the light suddenly disappeared, and darkness fell upon the passage, with the eerie swish of fast-running water in the confined space, and the last gurgles of the departing air now pouring out of the open door into the temples.

A little later silence reigned in the tunnel, the silence and darkness of death.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE SECRET CHAMBER.

As Monocloid and Paul went down the steps into the passage from the pavilion, with Diwan Ali behind them carrying the crowbar, his eyes wandering curiously from side to side in the gloom, rendered even more opaque by the little gleam of the hurricane lamp that Monocloid carried, Sayyid Ali pulled the tent-paulin across the hole, hiding both it and the big stone flag which lay to one side, and settled down for the morning.

For the first time since he had embarked on this fantastic quest with Monocloid, Paul felt that perhaps there was something in it, that perhaps there really was a treasure to find, that somewhere in this dark passage lay hidden a hoard of gold and jewels, heaped-up spoil of Badulla and his predecessors' wars. Perhaps it was the presence of the tall Punjabi havildar, who beyond doubt was the lineal descendant of the old Nawab, which made the thing seem more real to-day. Not that Diwan Ali had much knowledge of the place nor of its history—one or two stories of Badulla that had been handed down in the family, half-legend, half-truth, the tale of the first Nawab who had built the Khuni Darwaza and the Tower of Victory, stories handed down again orally, memories of an age when but few could read and write, and the Northern fighting men who had swept over India prided themselves, as do the Pathans to-day, on their inability to set pen to paper.

Diwan Ali himself, of course, was otherwise. Product of the twentieth century, he was India of the best saved

from the deterioration of mere education, which has been the curse of so much of India, by the constant companionship and supervision of the British officer, men in some ways not unlike himself, who considered it more important to sit a horse well and hold a gun straight, to tell the truth and play the game by their neighbours, than to write the most erudite literature or split the most microscopic of philosophical hairs—men who, like Archbishop Wilfrid's South Saxons, "distrust a man who speaks too well." Diwan Ali had added to the natural good qualities of the peasant soldier of good stock something of the simple culture of the public school, gleaned all unconsciously from daily contact with officers brought up in a caste whose first tenet is to look after their men and horses without any thought of self, to see their men fed before they feed themselves, to say to their men, "Come on" instead of "Go on," to do what they consider the right thing, regardless of how it affects themselves.

Not, of course, the kind of upbringing that leads to accumulation of material wealth for the individual, nor to high place in commercial or political circles, but the kind that is eminently useful in holding forgotten corners of the earth, in making the grass grow where grass never grew before—the kind of upbringing that makes half a company of semi-savages go up against certain death, or stick it out to the absolute finish; because a child of alien race, but of somehow kindred thoughts, with a laugh on his lips in the face of death, says to them, as he has said it a hundred times before on hockey or football ground, in cross-country run or weary route-march, "Come on!"

And since Diwan Ali and his kind have always been the natural prey of the lawyer and the money-lender, who grow fat among a people who can rarely read or write, these same officers who had taught him to use a hockey-stick and a gun had taught him also to wield a pen, first in his own language and then in theirs, so that he might be the better soldier while he served and the

better able to look after himself when he returned to his land in the Northern Punjab. All of which, superimposed on the fighting blood of Nawab Badulla and his kind, made a remarkably good kind of man of simple type.

Something of these thoughts flitted across Paul's mind as he turned to the Punjabi behind him when they entered the central chamber and wondered whether he in any way resembled the Nawab Badulla—Badulla who must have been a proper man from the way in which Pierre Rivecourt wrote of him.

"Where first?" he asked, watching Diwan Ali looking round the chamber curiously.

"Left arm, I think," said Monocloid, as he held up the lamp to look at the arching over the tunnels leading off. "Not a blinking thing marked anywhere here as far as I can see."

They followed the left arm to the end, seeking any marks on the stonework that might give them a clue. But nowhere did they see the least sign of carving, always the plain rough stonework. They spent half an hour and more without result, examining every stone in the hopes of finding the trident marks that Rivecourt mentioned. And as they stood at the end of the passage talking, all unknown to them on the other side of the wall, his ear to that chink in the masonry, Jack Taylor stood tense and alert at the sound of their voices.

"No bally good!" said Monocloid, at last picking up the lamp which he had set down for an instant. "Let's have a shot at the next one. I wish old Pierre had been a bit more explicit about his conventional signs."

They retraced their steps, and so down into the middle passage.

"What are we looking for, sahib?" asked Diwan Ali of Paul as they neared the end.

"Marks on the wall. The sahib who was with your great-great-grandfather wrote that there were marks on the stones like the marks on Hindu temples, and those

marks might show us something, perhaps tell us where they had hidden some of the Nawab's treasure."

"It is said among my folk that he was very rich. He made many wars, and in those days a soldier might gather wealth with the sword." There was nuance of regret in Diwan Ali's tone as he spoke, the old fighting blood regretting these modern methodical days, when war is an affair of administration and routine, of law and order to some extent; when the only thing the fighting man gets out of it is the same pay as he gets in days of peace, and possibly a medal or two to hang on his chest.

"Well, maybe we'll find some of it," said Paul. "Then you won't want to soldier any more."

"Come on, you; don't talk. Come and look for the conventional signs." Monocloid was on his knees at the end of the passage examining the lower tiers of the stonework. The others joined him, and for a while there was silence. But in the end it was Diwan Ali who, with a voice full of suppressed excitement, called to Paul.

"Look, sahib! What is this? Is this not the thing you seek?"

Paul joined him where he stood a couple of yards away, a lighted match just burning his fingers, and as it smouldered out Paul called to Monocloid.

"Here! We've got something like it! Pass over the lamp, quick."

The light showed them what beyond all doubt was a rough-cut treble mark in one of the blocks of stone, only an inch or two long, faint carving that might easily have escaped the eye if one had not been looking for it. Very rough on the rough stone, but what might by a stretch of the imagination be considered as the trident of Vishnu, the points directed towards the end of the passage.

"That's the blinking toasting-fork all right," said Monocloid as he peered at it through his eyeglass. "Wonder if there are any more like it? Here, pass me the pick." He tapped gently on the stone and on those

around, but no difference of echo came to their ears. "Better look round for some more like it. Thought I was on the right track."

It was another five minutes ere they found the others, one on the opposite side a little nearer the end, similar roughly-traced prongs, and then at last one rather more ornately carved, but smaller even than those first seen, on the topmost stone of the passage end. Paul swung up the crowbar again, and tapped upon the old masonry, but nowhere did the stonework ring hollow: sides and end of the passage all alike gave back the same unresponsive thud to the beat of the steel crow.

"Where is it?" asked Paul as he put down his crowbar an instant and mopped his brow. "There are three of the marks."

"The other two point this way and this points downwards. Also, it's the best made of the lot. Here, give me the toothpick."

Monocloid swung up the bar and beat away on the stonework. Then he stopped again. "Tell you what. The cunning souls have probably got a double wall packed with earth same as they had for the entrance, so as to make the thing sound much the same all over. I don't think it's under our feet. We're just on the rock strata here, and they'd have had to quarry down to hide it there. Bet you there's a walled-up chamber behind this mark." He swung up the bar and drove it against the stone with Vishnu's emblem. "We'd better break into the wall. I'll take first shift. Your arm ain't much to talk about even now when it comes to a job of work."

He peeled off his shirt and set to work, methodically breaking away the hard-set mortar at the edge of the rough-squared stone. Ten minutes later he had levered it out, and they craned forward to find more stonework behind it.

"Better get out the ones round it and then we can tackle the next layer," said Paul, lighting a cigarette. Monocloid continued with the crowbar, Diwan Ali taking

his place every now and then with the pick to lever out the loosened stones.

"Good enough, I guess," said Monocloid, stopping. "We can tackle the layer behind now. Here, sonny; catch!" He tossed the bar to Diwan Ali, who had likewise stripped off his shirt, for the place was stifling hot, and they were both dripping with sweat. And to Paul watching the Punjabi's figure as he swung the bar, shaking his bobbed locks from time to time as the sweat ran down his forehead, watched the great muscles rippling across the wheat-coloured shoulders, he wondered again what the scene had been like when Badulla and Rivecourt and their companions had walled up the passage, if indeed they had.

Diwan Ali peered into the cavity, reversed the crowbar, and with a heave and a wrench of his shoulders tore out a stone block as big as his head.

"Half a mo', laddy," said Monocloid, motioning him aside. "Earth behind all right. Now is it mother earth or merely a filling same like a hollow tooth? Better yank out another." He spoke to Diwan Ali in the vernacular, and the Punjabi worked again until there was room to drive the shovel into the packed earth behind, loosening it bit by bit, earth almost solid, it seemed. But by degrees they loosened it, a little narrow hole, until the shovel-head rang suddenly on stone again: or was it rock?

Paul pushed his arm in, and scratching away a handful of loosened soil, inserted the torch. And then it was that, as, in the tiny cleared space only a few inches square, he saw the rough stonework again at the back with the thin seam of mortar which showed that it was masonry and no natural rock, his exclamation to Monocloid came to the ears of Taylor crouching at the end of the passage, screened by the projecting stonework, "We've got it, Monocloid!"

Got it they undoubtedly had, as an hour later, working with sore hands in the hole where they had torn away the outer wall enough for a man to stand just

upright, the earth, falling away at their feet, showed more and more of the second wall behind. For there, clear cut this time and unmistakable, were Rivecourt's marks; and more, let into the stonework in sunken holes still just decipherable, the great seals bearing the twined Arabic letters of Badulla's name. A little later and the last of the earth was shovelled clear, and Monocloid, whose turn it was to work, put down the shovel and straightened his back.

"What price Monte Christo? We've got the bloomin' treasure all right. Wonder what's inside?" He picked up the crowbar again, and bit into the mortar of the second wall, and this time there was no mistaking the hollow ring that answered back his blows.

The three of them were tense with excitement, Monocloid with bar poised for another blow that should smash in between the stones, Paul and Diwan Ali at either side of the hole between the walls, which were some three feet apart, when the earth around them shook, and far off, apparently in the heart of the hill, a dull shaking roar broke upon their ears.

"What the hell's that?" queried Monocloid, stopping, bar still poised over his shoulder. "Hope to God it's not the passage coming in behind us. Here, we'd better see a bit. Couldn't be thunder at this time, and anyway we wouldn't hear it down here." He backed out of the hole.

"Whole blooming hill seems alive," said Paul. "Air's moving too. I don't like this. Come on back, quick!"

The air was full of faint sounds now instead of the usual grave-like hush of the subterranean passages, faint rushing as of distant wind, soft swishing noises, and the lamp flickered slightly as the warm air beat down towards them as they picked up their tools in case the tunnel had fallen, and hurried up the incline. Then as they turned into the central chamber they saw from the left-hand passage a small stream of black water boiling down towards them, covering the floor of the chamber even as they looked.

"Run like hell!" shouted Monocloid. "Something's bust!" They stumbled up the passage towards the blessed daylight above, listening to the rush and gurgle behind them, where the black waters spread out in the darkness, and tumbled up the stone stairs, to find Sayyid Ali standing in the doorway looking out. As they came up he turned and spoke to them.

"Surung urgia," he said. "A mine exploded somewhere. What is it, sahibs?"

They stood there uncertain a moment. Then Monocloid, with his eyes literally blazing, turned to Paul.

"I've got it! It's that ruddy stinker Taylor done something to the tanks on top. He must have suspected us and tried to drown us out. Come on up to the tanks." And still with the crowbar in his hand he tore bare-headed up the hillside to where the great tanks lay, Paul and Diwan Ali behind him, Sayyid Ali with Monocloid's topi after them.

And when they reached the tanks there was no further doubt. The bigger of the two tanks was already half empty, and in one corner was a great whirlpool, where the slimy green water was pouring downwards into some exit they could not see. They stood there and watched the water vanishing, the little branches and dead leaves eddying round and down into the whirling funnel in the corner.

"If I catch Mr Taylor I'll break his head in with this," said Monocloid, slowly balancing the crowbar. "Shall we go along to his tent now or look for him below?"

"He went down to the temples," said Paul. "That job has been done from inside somewhere. There's obviously another passage we haven't found. I wonder if it leads in from the temple end? Come along and leave me a bit of him to break up with the pick."

They tumbled over the wall, and as they came in sight of the temples stopped, for below them, gushing out of the cave mouth, was a slow stream of water, a stream that even as they watched slackened and died away as the tank above them emptied.

"Come along," said Monocloid, his eyes hard blue and a line about his mouth. "Bags first biff."

But there was nothing to "biff," for the temples were empty, and, save for the camp-stool and easel washed up derelict against the knees of the great image of Shiv, there was no sign of Taylor. But instead they saw behind the idol the black cavity of the sliding-door which Taylor had left open to bolt from.

"He couldn't have been there when the water came through," said Monocloid, as he stood by the door watching the last trickle of water making its way down. "He's probably bolted up to his camp. Come on; let's have the b—— out."

And so up the hill again to Taylor's camp, only to find it empty and an entirely unsuspecting servant, who insisted that Taylor had gone out sketching hours ago. The sight of Monocloid balancing his crowbar with a nasty light in his eyes, Paul swinging the short pick, and Diwan Ali clutching a muddy shovel, could hardly have been reassuring to the man, and their toil-stained condition, their dirty clothes, and their undoubtedly inimical atmosphere, must have frightened him. But he stuck to his guns, despite Monocloid's threats. The sahib had not been back all the morning, at least not for the last two hours.

"No go! Either he's done a bunk or else he's hidden in that tunnel. I'm b—— well going to have him out of it. Coming?" Monocloid shouldered his crowbar again.

"Where to?" asked Paul as they followed him.

"Tanks. Top end. I'm not going to try the bottom end. If he's out anywhere we can round him up later. He's got nothing except his feet to get away on unless he gets a pony anywhere, and we can soon find out. I'll get the blighter juggled if I have to risk my own neck for it. B——y swine!"

The tank was absolutely empty when they reached it, save for small pools of water here and there on the irregular floor. At the corner where the whirlpool had

been gaped splintered stonework showing against the surrounding mud and slime. They descended into the tank, and Monocloid bent over the hole, then shouted for Sayyid Ali to bring the lamp and a bit of string. The latter was not forthcoming, so they let the lamp down on the end of the Punjabi's unrolled pagri, and saw below them the floor of the passage.

"Hold her steady," said Monocloid. "I'm going down. Pass me the crowbar."

"Better be careful," said Paul as he dropped into the passage. "May be shaky inside."

"Quite all right," Monocloid's voice came up muffled through the opening. "It's a passage right enough. Runs both ways. We'll follow it down. Tell Diwan Ali to stop up on top in case Taylor's knocking around with any more monkey tricks up his sleeve. If they see him, tell 'em to push his face in and sit on him till we come back."

Which remark Paul translated faithfully and with emphasis before he slipped after Monocloid down the hole on to the damp floor of the tunnel.

"Look!" said the latter, holding the lamp up over his head and pointing to where the great slabs were splintered and broken away. "Dynamite or gun-cotton obviously. That's never an accident! What's the penalty for attempted murder under the Indian penal code?"

"If the Punjabis catch him I don't think we need worry about that part," said Paul, picking up the lamp which Monocloid had put down again. "Come on."

They followed the long passage with its insecure masonry, steadily down the incline, the damp gleaming floor below their feet showing the path the water had taken, until at last they halted on the edge of a steeper dip, whence came the faint noise of moving water.

"Look out!" called Monocloid. "Water ahead there!"

They stood on the edge of the incline, and the lamp's circle showed them the surface of the water that eddied

and rippled from time to time, and very slowly seemed to sink before their eyes.

"Funny that," said Monocloid. "There was nothing running out of the temple when we left."

"Probably a small dip in the passage," said Paul. "This water's been left in it, and is draining off slowly."

"Here! hang on to my hand," said Monocloid. "It can't be very deep." He pushed the crowbar ahead of him as he spoke. "Thought not." He waded forward, the water rising first to his knees, then nearly to his hips as he stopped. "Flat again now and rising in front. Pass me the lamp."

Paul passed him the lamp, and he held it up over his head, looking round the passage, which they could now see rose again in front.

"That's all it is. Just a minor dip. It's dry again ahead. Hulloo! here's another picture of Mr Snakes!"

In the wavering light of the lamp which he held the gleaming head and shoulders of Shiv emerged from the slowly sinking water, stone still wet from the recent flood, glistening and even more repulsive than usual.

Paul had followed Monocloid, and stood by his side in the pool looking at the idol rising inch by inch above the sinking black water. The image struck him forcibly as he looked at it staring impassively in front of it, still half buried in the water, the gleaming drops falling from the necklace of carved skulls, from the outstretched arms, from the coils of the roped hair, and glistening still in the blank eyes. Somehow it looked alive there in the faint light of the lamp, unpleasantly alive, and it seemed as if there was blood about the mouth, probably a last vestige of old, old paint now moistened by the waters.

"Well, come on," said Monocloid. "Nothing here. I wonder where that water's going? Probably into our little hutch, I expect. We'll have to do a bit of baling later on. Push along, governor."

But Paul, pushing on two steps level with the black image, tripped over something neither hard nor soft, something he had tripped over before upon well-remembered occasions, and he stopped.

"What's up?" asked Monocloid. Paul was bending down in the water, now not much more than knee-deep at the foot of the incline.

"Don't think we need go any farther," said Paul quietly as he felt in the water below him. "Don't think there'll be any need for the Indian penal code either. Taylor's here."

"Where?"

"Here, in the water under my feet! Lend a hand and yank him up. I should say he was dead by the feel of him. Hold a minute, and hang the lamp on Shiv's top arm."

Monocloid hung up the lamp, and together they dragged at the limp form, now just visible in the rather dirty water.

"Taylor all right," said Paul as the face came up. "Looks done for. We'd better get him out and try first aid. Presumably he hasn't been here much more than an hour, so we may have a chance. Come on; pull him up."

Monocloid was feeling about in the water at his feet. "Can't; stuck in something. Think his foot's caught. There; that's it. Feels like a hook. That's got it." He strained at something that gave suddenly. "Pick, by Jove! Must have caught his foot in it, I suppose. Heave him up."

They pulled him up the slope and laid him down, tore open his vest, but never the faintest heart beat to be heard, never the tiniest flutter of pulse.

"Can't be far to the end," said Monocloid. "Better try and get into the fresh air if we can. Five minutes won't make any odds after the time he's been in, don't suppose, and there's not room to work here."

They picked him up and stumbled on along the passage, and five minutes later saw the faint gleam of light

in front that dimmed their lamp as they neared it. Passing out into the brighter light of the cave temples, they laid Taylor down there, with the great image looking down upon him, as it had looked down upon him so often before, inscrutable and mocking.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE TREASURE.

"No go!" said Monocloid at last, as he stood up where he and Paul in turn had worked for the last hour on Taylor, trying to induce breathing by various methods of artificial respiration. "Cove's dead as mutton." He wiped the perspiration from his face, for they had worked hard.

"Yes; he's a goner all right," replied Paul after a last effort to find any trace of pulse, any sign of the least dimness on the watch-glass he held to the dead lips. Then he straightened out the limbs, and laid a handkerchief over the face to keep off the attention of the flies. "Suppose we'd better get him back to his camp now."

"If you stop here, I'll go and get Sayyid Ali and the servants. Better not leave him alone, though no one ever seems to come to this place."

"All right; I'll stop. Get a blanket and a couple of poles if you can to carry him on."

So as Monocloid disappeared through the temple corridors out into the sunlight beyond, Paul sat there on the plinth of the big image sorting out the events of the morning in his rather fevered brain. The thrill of the treasure hunt, the breathless excitement when they broke through the wall, the sight of Badulla's seals, the sudden distant thunder and the eerie motion of the air, the quick rush back and the sight of the water descending towards them, Monocloid's suspicions—suspicions turned to certainty by the sight of the gaping

hole in the bottom of the tank,—and lastly, that stumble over the prostrate figure hidden by the water, all passed again through his mind. Then had come the frantic efforts to restore consciousness to the man who, so it seemed, had deliberately tried to murder them.

Well, he was gone now, and they would never really know what had taken place; only surmise at best as to what had happened in that dark tunnel before the water came down upon them all. He fell to wondering who the dead man really was, whence he had come, and why. Probably they would discover something in his kit when they got up to his tent, might find some clue as to his relations. Then Monocloid's remarks about the possibility of his having the other pieces of jade returned to Paul's mind: not that they wanted them now, since they had found the hiding-place, or so it seemed. Still, they would be interesting.

He got up and went over to the body again. The heavy canvas-belt had pockets in it either side—a belt that had never left Taylor night or day for months now. Paul unbuckled it and slipped it off. There were things in the pockets undoubtedly, and as he returned to his seat under the big image, he slid the contents out into his hand—a small roll of sodden papers, a couple of little bundles of worn wash-leather. The papers he spread out on a stone to dry, unmistakably copies of parts of the same records that Monocloid and he had worked on, for he recognised extracts here and there, though some of the writing had blurred a little with the wet.

And in the wash-leather rolls were just two pieces of jade similar to his and Stella's, now locked away in his despatch-case in the camp above. He pondered the inscriptions, wondering what part they played in the scheme—evidently they indicated the other landmarks. So the funny old gun that had fascinated Stella so much had something to do with it. “Qila Shikan,” there it was. Rather an uncertain indication that one, since the gun might have been moved at any time. “Khuni Darwaza.” Yes, the great gate was a good

enough mark. That would endure as long as the fort itself.

It was quaint how they had been divided, how Monocloid and he, who were to find the secret, had got the two pieces marked with what were in a way friendly signs, while the man who lay yonder had stumbled upon those bearing marks somehow connected with death: the gate of slaughter and the name of the old gun. One of them—he wondered which—had been Gopal Tiwari's—Gopal who had died in torment in the palace on the hill above. The other had been Fifi Carter's, and Fifi lay in a nameless grave somewhere in the heart of the African bush, while Taylor, who had taken it from him, was here, at least part of him was here. Where was the other, the important part, now?

There seemed a fate about the green stones somehow: they had brought death directly to two men, perhaps indirectly to a third, though really there was no definite proof that Fifi Carter's death had anything to do with the jade. Then his thoughts slipped back to his great-uncle's words about the quest he had never even dreamed of, now fast reaching its close, of the utter and absolute change that had come into his life since he had been given that green amulet, of Stella who had wrought that change.

Then he reflected that to-morrow was Wednesday, and to-morrow would bring her answer—the answer that meant everything to him. Surely there could be no doubt what it would be. Surely it would be all right, no more foolish talk of ideals that must be paid for by life-long misery and unhappiness. Surely . . . and yet?

Steps on the flagged stones behind him put a stop to his reverie as Monocloid returned, Sayyid Ali and the two servants behind, looking curiously at the old images in the shadows.

“Couldn't find anything in the line of poles,” said Monocloid, “but we've fixed up loops at the blanket corners. One of us will have to take a hand.”

A few minutes later, with Taylor's body in the sag-

ging blanket, they made their way up the hill to the dead man's camp, where his servant, wide-eyed and silent, met them. He had no affection for Taylor, but for the moment it was his livelihood gone, and there was a certain feeling of loneliness at being left without a master here in a strange country, for he was from the far south of the Madras Presidency. Still, doubtless, the sahibs would help him, and he was already considering his bill, which might safely be doubled with all speed. And there were various possessions which might be annexed without any one being the wiser, since the dead man did not seem to have any friends. He had joined Taylor on the latter's arrival in India, and never had the sahib seemed to meet any one he knew. He was therefore more than annoyed when later on, as the two white men went away, they left that hard-faced Northern soldier sitting at the tent door, who refused to let the little dark-visaged Madrassi enter at all.

They laid Taylor down upon the bed, sent the servants back to their camp, and looked around the tent.

"We'd better see if he's got any people out here," said Monocloid, as he hunted through the boxes in search of any papers which might give them some information. "Doesn't seem to be much here. Banks with the Alliance Bank evidently—Bombay branch. They might be able to tell us something. There doesn't seem to be a letter of any sort."

"Here's a notebook," remarked Paul, emptying out a leather writing-case as he spoke. "Mostly full of sketches, though. That doesn't help any. He didn't seem to have any friends, or else they didn't write to him much. Does that passbook give his address?"

"No; Majestic Hotel, Bombay; that's all." Monocloid replaced the various things in the trunk, and stood up. "We're not much further. We can send a wire to the bank at Bombay and tell 'em he's dead, and ask them to wire us the address of any relations he's got that they know of. Here are Fifi's papers, or I'm a Dutchman, and you said you'd got the pieces of jade. There's noth-

ing else except the money in the despatch-case. Pass over the keys and I'll lock it, and we'll leave Sayyid Ali here in charge. Don't like the looks of the monkey-faced gent outside. He'll probably loot the lot if he's left alone."

"We shall have to get the body back to Toka or Khyrabad," said Monocloid, as they left the little tent. "That'll mean an inquiry and a doctor and a policeman and all sorts of interfering people. Wish this was Bolshevikia, where no one minded a corpse or ten. They'll all come nosing over here, and we shall have to go and give evidence and be looked at suspiciously. The first thing we've got to do now is to get back into the tunnels, and see where the connection is. If possible we'll try and hide it, so that we can show any one who comes over the whole of Taylor's bit without giving them a hint of our own. Then when they're safely away we might get on with our little job. We'll get a bite of lunch as we pass the tents."

They spent ten hurried minutes bolting chupattees and cold pigeon stew, and then, returning to the tanks, followed the passage down once more, until they reached the dip where they had found Taylor. The water had now drained away completely, and the hole in the foot of the wall was clearly visible.

"I'll bet that's where it came through on top of us," said Monocloid, bending down with his torch. "I'm going to crawl through."

He suited the action to the word, and an instant later his voice came back muffled from the other side.

"It's the left arm of our place all right. Now I wonder what his scheme was? He couldn't expect the water to wash us through that little slit."

His head emerged again on Paul's side, and his body followed. Then he stood up, studying the wall, and Paul asked him what he was looking for.

"Dud charge, old bean. Probably the blighter put one in here that didn't go off. He was a cunning stinker, and he'd have known that enough water wouldn't stop

here to drown us out on the far side." He was examining the wall carefully as he spoke, stooping down to the circle of light, and studying the masonry courses methodically.

"There it is! The dirty blighter! Look!"

And Paul, following the light, saw the tell-tale inch of black fuze, charred at the projecting end. Not a pleasant kind of neighbour in that confined space.

"What are we going to do?" he queried. "If we try and push it off we'll fetch in the whole wall, which is just what we don't want. We could fill up that small hole so that it wouldn't be noticed, but we can't rebuild the wall itself. On the other hand, if we leave it here and some one hits it the lot may go up. It's tricky work trying to yank out a detonator. I wonder what the charge is? If it's gun-cotton we could soak it thoroughly, and once the primer's wet we'd have more chance."

"Won't be gun-cotton. It's probably commercial dynamite. The only thing is to get her out somehow. It's not packed very tightly." Monocloid was gingerly scraping away the earth packed round the charge as he spoke. "Told you so." He pointed to the oiled yellow paper round the end of a dynamite cartridge. "Think I can ease her out. You'd better stand back a bit, old sport, in case she pops. It don't want two to do it, and I've had more experience at this game than you. Get round the corner a yard or three, and wait for the noise."

There was nothing to do but obey, and Paul sheltered round the corner, listening to Monocloid's dolorous whistle. It seemed an age before Brown called to him, "Tooth's out!" and he came back to find that worthy holding a little copper detonator in one hand and a bundle of broken dynamite cartridges in the other, the torch jammed into a chink in the wall.

"That's that," said Monocloid. "Now to fill up the hole. Luckily the water hasn't washed away all the stuff he pulled out. Go along up the passage to the

place where the roof's come in, and bring back some earth and bits of mortar to pack into the seams. There's Taylor's coat there to carry it in."

He deposited the explosives safely out of the way, and began to replace the stones. It took them nearly an hour, but they made a very presentable job of it, and when they finally stood up and looked at the place where the hole had been, they mutually agreed that if one didn't know that there was anything to look for, the chances were that no one would ever spot anything.

There was no need to tell any one that Taylor had been working there, nor even that that was the exact spot where they had found him. They could plead a very natural ignorance of what had happened. The explosion by the tank which had attracted their attention where they had been pottering about in the ruins above, had brought them to see what the unusual noise was, and the discovery of the water running out of the temples below had revealed the door in the rock. Subsequent exploration had brought them upon Taylor's body, and beyond that they were in no better position to reconstruct the story than any one else, save that the other dynamite cartridges in the mule-trunk in his tent pointed to the fact that he had probably blown up the passage under the tanks, perhaps in ignorance of the place, and under the impression that they concealed something or other unknown to them.

"And now?" asked Paul, as they returned to the temples. "It's just on four o'clock. What are we going to do about sending word to any one? Or are we going to get a cart and take the body along to Toka?"

"Not yet awhile," replied Monocloid as they emerged, and he flung the explosives down the little old well outside the temple precincts. "We're going to get Diwan Ali and have a hurried look in the treasure place. If there is anything there I'm jolly well going to see it before any one else arrives. I hope they won't spot it, but if they do I'm going to get first pick. Then

we'll replace the trapdoor, clean up, and hope for the best. After that we'll send Sayyid Ali along on a pony to Carlos and ask him to come over in the car quick and lend a hand. Mainwaring isn't leaving till to-morrow, and he won't give the game away even if we do tell him the whole yarn."

Three-quarters of an hour later saw them at the central chamber where they had fled from the water. The floor was wet, but the water appeared to have drained off, some of it down the passage towards the treasure wall, or what they were now sure was the wall which concealed the hiding-place. Fortunately the right passage was at a bigger slope, and most of the water had run off into that, nearly reaching the roof. In the actual tunnel where they had been working it was less than two feet deep, even at the end.

"Lucky, that," said Monocloid. "If it *had* filled this up we'd have had hell's delight in trying to get it out without a pump. As it is, we can work in the water all right. Come on, Diwan Ali; your shift."

The Punjabi, knee-deep in the water, swung up the crowbar, and once again the passage was filled with the steady tap-tap of the clinking metal on the dull stone, the hollow echoes answering back the methodical song. They took it in turns, and the sweat poured down their faces for all that they stood in the knee-deep water. The wall was thick, and they had to clear a whole layer in front, only to find another behind, and then, as Monocloid took the bar from Diwan Ali and set to work, the steel smashed right through into hollow space behind.

Twenty minutes later there was a small hole gaping in front of them, just big enough for Monocloid to get his head and one arm holding the torch through, while the others pressed upon him in their endeavours to see what lay behind.

"The blinkin' boodle, boys and girls! Chock-full of jimmy-o'-goblins and bric-à-brac of all sorts! The Derby Sweep ain't in it! Looks about thigh-deep in

parts, jewelled armour and swords, chunks of gold and silver plate, all sorts of what-nots ! ”

He backed out and mopped his forehead, while Paul grabbed the torch from him to see what lay inside.

It was not a big chamber, perhaps twelve feet square, with a low vaulted roof. But in the light of the torch it showed heaped up with mouldering boxes, iron-bound and brass-clamped, one of them with the wood rotted away, from whose gaping sides a cascade of dull gold pieces had poured out over the pile of jewelled helmets that lay below ; spiked steel helmets with chain mail neck-pieces, steel inlaid with beaten gold and silver and rich with jewels, emerald and ruby that flashed back the rays of the lamp.

In one corner lay two great elephant howdahs, covered with chased and engraved gold plates, the seats piled with weapons, every one of which was fit for an Eastern monarch ; hilts of worked gold, with inlay of jade and lapis ; hilts with great single rubies, making red splashes of light above the warm dulness of gold and the bright flicker of silver. Close to Paul's hand on some bigger chests below was a little box of carved sandal-wood that he withdrew, and which even as he pulled it out came to pieces, leaving a sparkling cascade of light over his fingers ; a great necklace of diamonds, every stone a picked one, ending in a triangular pendant, the centre of which was a square-cut emerald such as he had never seen before.

Diwan Ali's low gasp of astonishment at the treasure disclosed reminded Paul of the existence of the man to whom, as far it could belong to any one, all the hoard on the other side of the wall belonged, and he handed him the torch and bade him look.

“ What are we going to do with the lot ? ” he said to Monocloid, as he played with the necklace. Precious stones, least of all diamonds, appealed to him but little. Emeralds and blue sapphires were about the only really precious stones that Paul appreciated at all, though he liked the semi-precious ones for their warmth of colour,

for the romance that always seemed to hang about them—romance to his mind so conspicuously absent from the cold dazzling diamonds.

“Heaven knows!” replied Monocloid, rather taken aback for once at the magnitude of the find. “If the Government of India hears about them they’ll go up through the roof, cut the Army budget for ten years, and hurriedly take off half an anna from salt on the strength of this unearned increment. Taragurh is British territory; we bought it off Toka in 1820, though it’s never been garrisoned now since the end of the Mahratta wars. Wonder what’d happen if we paraded Diwan Ali as the rightful heir? Bet they’d do him down somehow or other with some special kind of law, amended twice yearly for the last half century and now quite illegible. Kind of thing the pay babu confutes you with when you try and get a little honest travelling allowance out of him.”

“Shut the lot up again and wait, I say,” said Paul, still fingering the diamonds. The sight of all this wealth somehow left him cold now that the quest was ended, the excitement of the chase over. He had always had enough money for his wants, and the idea of instant riches for which moreover he had not worked was somehow distasteful. He would like one or two of the weapons he had seen, for he revelled in old steel-work. There was a half-glimpsed shield inlaid with beautiful filigree, which would fill a niche he remembered in the smoking-room of his great-uncle’s place in Sussex. And he would like some really nice stones for Stella, not overpowering things like this barbaric necklace, suitable only for the wife of a war-time contractor. Beyond that he had not the slightest desire to take anything. But he would like Diwan Ali to have it if only he could be sure that the man would not lose his natural good qualities in the sudden access of undreamed wealth, as so often happens to men, and to the Oriental more than to most.

“We can’t get out the stuff now. It’d take us a couple of days to clear the place and a week to sort it,

and there's sure to be some one over here from Khyrabad when the local authorities hear about Taylor's death. The policeman and probably the Deputy Commissioner will certainly come along, even though they'll believe our yarn. But they'll want to have a look at the place from mere curiosity. It would pay us best really to keep quiet, and then refind it later on after we've sounded the powers a bit. We might enlarge the hole a trifle, and gather up one or two things worth keeping, and then fill it up again. We ought to ensure Diwan Ali getting some of it anyway, whatever happens afterwards."

And Monocloid agreed that it would be sounder.

"Well, Diwan Ali, and what would you do with that lot?" asked Paul as the man turned round.

"Buy a lot of land—lots of it. And two rifles—no, three. Build a large house. How many houses could I build?"

"Paul held out the necklace. "That'll buy you more land than you and all the sons you ever have can plough," said he. "Rifles as many as you want, a motor-car if you like as well, and dozens of houses."

"There's too much there for one man," said Diwan Ali simply. "One man couldn't spend it. It's a king's treasure, and my folk are no longer kings."

"True talk," replied Paul. "We will shut it up again presently, and then we will take counsel later. You will get all the land you want, never fear, and money to take a commission if you would like to, and send your sons to the Military College when you have them."

And that prospect seemed to please the Punjabi more than anything. Soldier by descent, the idea of becoming an officer holding the King's commission, with money enough to keep up the position among his fellows and to educate his children later in the same path, was enough.

So they enlarged the hole until it was big enough to squeeze through, and then they entered the chamber, standing upon the accumulated fruits of years of war and

pillage and hoarding, and selected certain things that pleased their individual fancies, Diwan Ali's first selection being a tulwar bearing his ancestor's name in gold inlay upon the Damascus blade. But Paul took from a chest a small handful of cut emeralds, which he hoped to have made up into a wedding present for Stella. Also some more diamonds in trust for Diwan Ali, in case later on the authorities might take possession of the whole treasure.

Then, with their pockets bulging and under their arms the weapons they had taken as souvenirs, they retraced their steps up the long passage, to where the trapdoor above them showed the last faint gleams of the evening light. They slid the great stone back into its place, filling the interstices around with dust and earth, removed all traces of the opening as far as was possible; and with the moon just swinging up into the faint blue of the darkening sky, made their way back to their camp to lock up their treasures.

"I'll write a chit to Carlos and tell him something of what's happened," said Paul, taking up a writing-block after they had put away the various things they had collected in the treasure chamber. "We'd better send Sayyid Ali; he can get a pony from the village, I expect. He ought to get to Carlos somewhere before midnight, and if Mainwaring hasn't left they'll be here with the car before dawn."

So sitting there he wrote a bald account to Carlos, saying nothing about the treasure, but mentioning Taylor's death, and asking him to come over at once. Then they went over again to Taylor's tent, where the still form lay upon the camp-bed, and Sayyid Ali sat like a statue at the door.

As Monocloid sent Sayyid Ali off to get one of the servants to take his place, Paul stood looking at the dead man, wondering again what his history was, what he had been before the war had caught him in its meshes; and fate had sent Fifi Carter to die in his camp, and so to bring him to his own death. There was no resent-

ment in his mind now at the effort to murder him and Monocloid ; the man had gone beyond that, and it had all been so impersonal and distant. And then retribution had been so swift. He drew the sheet over the pale face once more, and joined Monocloid outside.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

NIGHT.

STELLA sat in a camp-chair near the open door of her Swiss cottage tent in Carlos' camp, the vivid moonlight outside throwing dappled bars of silver across the small clearing between the big clumps of bamboos, silver streaks, and shadows that shifted now and then as the soft breeze freshened or sank from time to time. Outside, the faint whisper of insect life, the soft rustle of the breeze in the feathery bamboos and in the branches of the tall trees behind her tent, made a continuous song that seemed somehow to hold in it all the mystery of the jungle, so still sometimes in the hot noon, so vibrant with insistent life in the shadows of the night.

She had extinguished her lamp and sat there, a silk kimono drawn about her, letting the night breeze play over her face, which just showed in the shadows of the tent, her great grey eyes wide under the arched brows, her lips a darker splash across the pallor of her face. The Carlos had gone to bed early after dinner, and Stella was grateful for the chance of being alone with her thoughts, for this last opportunity of trying to balance things out before Paul's expected arrival to-morrow—to-morrow when she had promised to give him an answer.

To-night she must make the great plunge, settle once for all the line she was to take, choose finally between the long dusty road and the hill-paths. But now there was no longer the half-caught glimpse of fair valleys at the end of the road ; there was nothing to see save the

grey dust and the stones. The valleys were hidden in impenetrable grey mists, not the peaceful grey mists of evening under a translucent sunset sky with faint after-glow of apricot and glimmer of new-found stars, but the heavy grey blanket mists of despair and weariness.

And as the long road grew greyer and greyer, its unending length drawing out before her, year after year of nothing worth doing, nothing being worth while, until in the end it would finish in shadows—shadows that held nothing, that never had held anything except mockery and illusion, dreams that had no reality,—so the hill-paths grew more inviting, the promise of the fulness of life, if she choose to take it now, more and more attractive.

This last week had been one long nightmare of blackness, and time and time again she had been tempted to force a decision, to write to Paul and tell him that she had made up her mind, that she would take present gladness and leave the distant star, that she would seek happiness in giving it to him, and leave the rest to Fate and Fate's Master, if indeed such a being existed at all, which in her darker moments seemed incredible.

Somehow she had never quite given way, always she had caught hold again just in time, grasped at her ideals once more, though with grip that weakened instant by instant, with grasp that was the feebler and hand the more tired with each new effort. And now here was the end. To-morrow she must decide for good and all.

She looked back over her life, the empty wasted years that might have been so full of sweetness if only things had been different, if she had not been a fool in the first instance, if she had not been carried off her feet by the glamour of what her girlish fancy had deemed to be love. And at the idea a new bitterness swept over her. Love? Why, she did not even know the very first letter of the word in those days, let alone having the smallest glimpse of its true meaning! Yes; she had been a fool! And looking back she felt now in her hopelessness that it was the one unforgiveable sin, that you paid more

heavily for being a fool than for any other conceivable crime you might commit.

And now what was she about to do ? Was she going to be a fool again ? Throw away happiness for the sake of a shadow—no, not even for a shadow,—for the sake of something which had ceased to be even a shadow for her, something which was the last clinging remnants of ideas all based on false premises. Happiness had always to be bought, to be paid for first by taking careful thought, by balancing out things, by reasoning ; not to be got by sitting still with folded hands waiting for it to fall into your lap, imagining that by clinging to certain conventions and ideals, long ago outworn and discarded by all who claimed to reason, that therefore you acquired the right to that happiness which every human being craves.

There was no past to look back to, nothing except bitterness, save for these last few months, when Paul's love had come to colour her whole life, "to stab her spirit broad awake," as she herself had phrased it, to teach her longing and desire and craving for love and happiness as she had never known she could feel, to show her depths and heights within herself that hitherto she had never even glimpsed.

And the future was in her hands now to make or mar once again. She might choose happiness with Paul or throw it away, might spend such years as were left in the bitter regret at having been a fool a second time, and there would never be a third time. Of that she felt sure as the dark shadows crowded about her mind. Would she get even this second time ? Might not jealous fate step in and snatch from her what even now she could not quite make up her mind to take, what she had delayed so long to grasp ?

Then as she sat there "Stella of the thinks" came up again for a second to ask why she would not hold on a little longer, have faith yet once again, stick to the ideals she had stuck to so long, not throw over everything for a passing moment of blackness, reminded

her that times as black had come and gone again before.

And the older stronger Stella answered back with words of bitterness beyond all believing—asked her what she had had of life so far that she should now throw away the offer of happiness, cast aside the chance of life before the final shadows came down, as come they would; asked her what she could promise in exchange; jeered at her for not being able to point to anything concrete, for the empty illusions she had cherished, for the sacrifices she had made for no return; asked her to point to the valleys she had seen so often. Where were they? Just vanished and gone, mirages without any reality.

But reality was here, reality waiting for her to take, love of the man she wanted, love all down the years instead of loneliness, fulness of life instead of emptiness of heart and bitterness of regret, fulfilment of every desire now and in the years to come, Paul and Paul's children. And no price to pay, merely to claim a divorce, which every one would praise her for claiming. To follow the line of action that three-quarters of the world would follow without even stopping to think about it, and that the remaining quarter would follow too if only they would let their reason work instead of blinding it with the bogies of superstitious fears.

What was this talk about sacrifice and duty? Whom was Stella sacrificing? Paul chiefly, wasn't it? She could go along with her head in the air, her pride rejoicing in the contemplation of *her* steadfastness; but what of him? He had no ideals of that sort to cling to. He merely wanted what every man had a right to—the woman he loved. She was going to make him suffer, make him suffer as no other could, since he loved her so deeply. Perhaps in the end thrust him into some one else's arms, some one who couldn't give him real happiness, but who might to some small extent take the place that she alone could really fill. And with that thought one more factor came into play against Stella of the ideals,

the thought of Paul seeking happiness—even if only of sorts—with some one else.

And then while the bodily Stella sat there looking out wide-eyed into the moonlight with unseeing eyes, the natural Stella, Stella of the night, balanced all her arguments against Stella of the ideals one after another, as she had so often done before, demolished argument after argument that had been advanced, showed the falsity of this, the futility of that, proved the truth of her philosophy that *now* is the time that matters, that *this* is the world that counts, that all any of us can do is to give, and in giving find, happiness down here, and leave the rest to fate or to the Master of Fate if He did exist. And if He did exist, surely He would understand, since He made us men and women, made us to find happiness.

And then it seemed to Stella that the conflict ceased, as though Stella of the ideals had no other word to say, and it seemed as if her soul had been an arena wherein two combatants had fought to the bitter end and now there was no fight left; that all was hushed for an instant for the last scene; that her mind was clear for a moment to think if she could, to pray if she might. And her lips moved as she tried to voice her thoughts, to ask for light, to understand, as she had asked so often and found nothing and no one to answer.

The moon swung higher and the shadows shortened outside, while the gloom in the tent darkened as the moonbeams drew away from the entrance, just as the shadows darkened about Stella's tired mind and her hands refused to grip any more, and there were only the two pictures—the long road that was not even grey now, but black, black, black, and the hill-paths with the birds singing under the pines, and the turf all starred with wild flowers, and Paul waiting to take her by the hand and lead her into the valleys of all delight.

Once again she tried to pray, tried to get things clear, to understand the game, to understand it so that she might play it properly; and as she tried with the last little effort of goodwill when thought and under-

standing had been buffeted into coma, Carlos' story of the squirrels came back to her, the reward that had come to those who had shown their willingness to help. Surely she had shown hers, more than shown her desire to play the game. But there was no reward for her, nothing but blackness impenetrable, no hand to help.

Her lips ceased to move, as once more in a last struggle the two halves of her being locked again in combat, the final tussle on the trodden bloodstained sand. And then in blackness such as she had never experienced, with Stella of the ideals at her last gasp in the hold of another infinitely stronger than herself, the stronger, for victory after victory, with all the pulses of desire, with all the dread of loneliness, with every human call upon that other's side, Stella Nash made up her mind, and as she did so felt the blackness fall away from her, as her wearied mind sank down, too beaten even to realise the shadows that were about her, seeking nothing save oblivion.

She sat there, her face dead white in the darkness, her soul and mind, even her body, utterly worn out, knowing only one thing, the peace that follows decision, whether decision be right or wrong.

And then her eyes closed, and she lay there in the long chair too tired even to go to bed, too tired even to catch the faint far-off hoof-beats in the silent night, where Sayyid Ali, on a pony hired in the village, came trotting down the forest road, the moonlight throwing queer shadows about him on the narrow path, his pony shying at the imagined terrors of the forest and at the little things that ran from him into the shadows or at the occasional gleaming eyes which looked out of the bushes as he passed, Sayyid Ali in chaplis and baggy trousers, his low-tied pagri well down on his head, and tucked into his shirt pocket Paul's letter to Carlos.

He turned in at the path to the camp, and the hoof-beats died away as his pony jogged over the turf, until he pulled up in the centre of the camp, swung out of the saddle, and called aloud to the servants.

His voice brought Stella back to consciousness, as looking out she saw him and his pony in the moonlight outside, and her heart stopped an instant, then bounded again furiously as she recognised the Punjabi, and sprang to her feet. Had Fate stepped in now then? What brought him here at this hour of the night to wake the sleeping camp?

Carlos, in pyjamas, tumbled out of the door of the tent opposite, and spoke to Sayyid Ali as the servants awoke and lights glimmered in the tents. She saw the Punjabi hand him something, heard the faint murmur of their voices, and, pulling her kimono closer about her, came out of her tent.

"What is it, Carlos? Has anything happened?"

Her voice sounded strained and unreal even to herself as she sought to force down the panic that tore at her heart, while Carlos lit a match to read the scrawl, shouting the while for a lamp.

"Some kind of an accident, Stella; he's not clear."

Then she caught the Punjabi's hurried words, "Sahib murgia" ("the sahib is dead"), and cold fear stabbed at her heart as she swayed upon her feet an instant seeking words. Then she heard Carlos' voice again through the mists.

"Chit from Paul. Some other white man has rolled up there and come to grief. Got drowned in a tunnel in the fort apparently, though Paul doesn't say how. He wants me and Mainwaring to go over and lend a hand. Hulloo, Stella! What's up?"

For Stella was standing there in the moonlight with wild eyes, her hand on her heart, her thoughts crowding about her suddenly, memories thronging over her, her face dead white.

The man she had seen in the tonga two days ago! The face that had called up so many visions of the past, that had kept her awake all that night, until in the reassuring dawn-light she had persuaded herself that it was all fancy. Malaya was thousands of miles away, and even coincidence could hardly be so wild as this.

And yet at the moment she had seemed so sure, the face had seemed so vivid in the white glare of the headlights, and she had not been thinking of the man last seen so many years before. She had been sure all that night as she lay awake, and in the certainty memory after bitter memory had come surging up, each one a new handicap upon the overweighted shoulders of Stella of the ideals seeking to hang on. Could it be him? Could it?

"What's up, Stella? Feeling queer? Paul's all right. It's some stranger, only they want a hand in the business. They'll have to get him in to Toka or Khyrabad and get a doctor, that's all."

Stella mastered her voice again and spoke calmly, for all that she felt as if her heart must burst, and something seemed to hammer in her head.

"No; I'm all right. I thought something had happened to . . . to them. I heard Sayyid Ali say something about the sahib being dead. But, Carlos, who is the man who's been killed?" She almost feared to hear the answer.

"I think it was the man we saw on the way back the night we were there. He says it was the artist Mainwaring spoke of. Here, Frank!"

Mainwaring, in the gaudiest of pyjamas, had just emerged from his tent, his usually heavy slumbers having been broken by the continued noise outside, and concurrently with him Marjorie appeared, hurriedly draped in Carlos' burberry, the first thing her hand had lit on in the dark.

Carlos proceeded to tell them what he had told Stella.

"I thought it was Taylor we saw that night. Bad luck coming back to get laid out almost the next day. Wondered what happened?" Mainwaring lit a cigarette, and wished he'd remembered to brush his hair before turning out. He was careful of his personal appearance where the other sex was concerned.

But to Stella the name brought back still more

memories. Malaya might be several thousand miles away, but those cousins with whom her husband was reported to be working were called Nash-Taylor, the other branch of the family that her husband had sometimes jeered at for their addition to the family name, an addition only made shortly before her marriage. She remembered him holding forth on the point in his rather overbearing didactic way, which once she had thought indicated such strength of character.

"Paul wants us to run over. He wants you to lend your car to get them over to Khyrabad or Toka. They'll have to tell some one about it, and probably there'll have to be some sort of inquiry, Paul seems to think. Are you game?"

"Yes, rather. I'll run 'em over to Khyrabad. The policeman's in, and so is the D.C. They were on tour, but came back last week. There's a parson stopping there just now, too. I think we ought to get a move on soon, though; it's hottish in the middle of the day."

He looked at Carlos, and Carlos nodded. One can't keep dead people indefinitely under an Indian sun.

"Well, I'll push off as soon as you like. Give me time to change into some kit and have a bite of chota hazri before we start. It's twoish now. We can get under way by three, and be up the hill long before five. We might be able to run back in the cool of the morning and be in Khyra by eleven."

"I'm coming along with you," said Carlos. "Tell 'em to get some tea and things for us, old girl." He turned to his wife. "Meantime you two had better go back to bed. We'll be back this evening. Stella's gone already, I see. She had a bit of a fright, I think; thought something had happened to Paul."

"That's good for her," said Marjorie unfeelingly. "May shake her up and teach her what she wants." She turned to the servants with swift orders in Hindustani, bidding them get tea and eggs and other things suitable for chota hazri.

But Stella had not gone back to bed, as Carlos thought. On the contrary, feverishly pulling on her clothes, her brain was working with lightning speed, obsessed with the one desire of getting to Taragurh to see this man Taylor before they took him away. She had understood perfectly well what Mainwaring had meant about the heat and about the parson. They were going to take him into Khyrabad and bury him there, and it was essential that she should see him first.

And when Marjorie, attracted by the light in Stella's tent, came in, she was surprised to find her nearly dressed.

"Whatever are you doing, Stella? What's the good of dressing at this hour? I'm going back to bed as soon as the men have gone and do a long sleep."

"I'm going with them, Marjorie. And it's no good your asking me why, because I can't tell you. All I know is that I'm going to Taragurh now if I have to ride Sayyid Ali's pony or walk all the way. Don't look at me like that, because I'm not mad, although perhaps I have been."

And looking at Stella's face, without a vestige of colour save in the lips, the unnatural brightness of her eyes set in great patches of shadow, her whole air of determination to do something or other which Marjorie didn't understand, Marjorie wondered whether she was not still mad, as she said she had been.

For once she was too taken aback even to argue, and followed Stella meekly to where Carlos was standing by the camp-table filling a cheroot-case, while the bearer was getting chota hazri ready. And to him likewise Stella announced her emphatic intention of going to Taragurh either with him and Mainwaring in the car, or on her flat feet if they wouldn't take her.

"Of course we'll take you, Stella, if you want to come. I don't quite think it's the morning for a woman, but if you want to come, come along." Like Marjorie, he thought Stella was temporarily off her head, and

wondered if she had been out in the sun too much the previous afternoon.

“It may not be the place for a woman, but it’s the place for this woman. Marjorie, dear, give me some tea, quick. I’ve got a splitting head.”

CHAPTER XXIX.

DAWN.

MAINWARING swung the car off the little track on to the main jungle road, and turned her head towards Taragurh. The air was still and cool, almost a nip of cold in it, and the sky overhead was silvered with the great moon just past the full, and dotted with infinity of golden stars, little discreet stars that seemed almost afraid to show their light in the presence of the great silver shield which swung amongst them.

To either hand lay the thick growth of the jungle, the occasional shadowy clearing, the formless road in front lit faintly by the white headlights; heavy dense shadow of tree and lighter shade of undergrowth and bush; the silver streaks of running water in white sand, where they crossed an arm of the Tana River, and in the thick reeds on the opposite bank heard the sudden grunt and scurry of a sounder of wild pig disturbed at their approach. Once in a little clearing, with fields and two or three tiny huts, where a few families fought the encroaching jungle for a scanty living, they saw the rough machans among the crops, where the sleepy youth of the village sat with bows and mud pellets to scare the deer and pig from their fields, and their great china-eyed buffaloes slept in the thorn-hedge, reared as a protection against wandering tiger or panther.

And to Stella it all seemed shadowy and unreal as she leant back muffled in motoring-coat, for the air was chill and getting colder as the night drew on. She, like her mind it seemed to her, was going through a country

of shadows, a land where all the values had altered, where everything seemed unreal, where nothing was definite, all was vague.

And what was she going to find now at the end of her journey? Could it be perhaps that after all her long struggle had not been in vain, that when there had been no more fight left in her, when she could not move even the tiniest of pebbles, Someone else had come to move the great stone, to give her some token of thanks for the goodwill she had tried to display? Was she perhaps going to be allowed to find happiness and love and all that she craved for and still be able to keep the ideals which, as Stella knew so well, had been more than the half of herself? They had been twined up with her very heart and soul for so long that their abandonment could not but affect her, and that price also she had counted up earlier in the night, wondering whether the happiness she could give to Paul would make her forget that lost part of herself, whether in the years to come, if she jettisoned the ideals she had held so long, she would find something else to make up for them in the love of husband and children.

Had she been right after all on Sunday? Were her first impressions correct when she had suddenly sat back out of the light at the glimpse of a man's face in the darkness? It had been such a hurried glimpse, half-caught in the dazzling light and shifting shadows. But the name now too! Perhaps only coincidence. And yet half afraid to believe in the possibility, with the insistent memories of how fate had cheated her before rising in her mind, still there were springings of hope at her heart. Perhaps everything was going to change now, perhaps after the night she might find the full dawn, a dawn absolutely cloudless and unalloyed to make up for the shadows and the darkness, the bitterness and sorrow that had been her part for so long.

And when Taragurh loomed up in the moonlight and they turned off the road up the track where she had

seen the tonga on Sunday, quite illogically hope seemed to get even stronger, as somehow she felt that dawn must be at hand for her, even as far off on the eastern horizon there seemed to be just the faintest suggestion of a paling of the starlit indigo of the sky—a paling not due to the moon, now well over towards the west.

Mainwaring, with horn sounding continuously to attract the attention of the camp if by chance they were awake, pulled up below the hill, and presently a wavering star of light jogging down the track showed that they had been heard in the silence of the night. Another ten minutes and Paul and Diwan Ali came up in the moonlight to where they sat in the car, Carlos' cheroot making a red star in the shadows of the tree where they had stopped.

But it was not till Paul had greeted the others that he realised Stella's presence, and wondered what had brought her here now; and as they climbed the steep path, Mainwaring carrying the lantern he had taken from Diwan Ali, who had been left with the car, walking with Carlos in front, he asked her.

"I came to give you your answer, Paul, but before giving it I wanted to see this man you wrote about. I may be mad, but I saw him the night we left; we nearly ran into him, and it seemed to me that I knew his face. It may be that when I see him I shall know more about things. There may be nothing in it, but I must see him, if only for my peace of mind."

And then Paul suddenly connected the man's name with Stella's talk of those cousins in Malaya, the Nash-Taylors. Why hadn't he thought of that before? The initials marked on the man's kit had been "J. N. T." Perhaps he had some more papers; perhaps somewhere in his tent would be something which might help him and Stella. But even yet he had not grasped all that Stella had in her mind.

"Do you mean, perhaps, he is something to do with your husband?" he asked in a low voice. The others were some yards in front.

"Perhaps," said Stella. "I shall know when I've seen him."

They were silent again then, Stella wondering what the dawn would bring, and Paul wondering whether there could be anything in her theory.

Monocloid was waiting for them by the tent, his bearer getting some tea ready, for probably the sahibs would be cold after the drive. And as they sat there outside, Monocloid and Paul gave the others part of the history of the day before, but not all of it yet. That could come later. They left out about finding the treasure, confining themselves to the fact that they had been exploring one of the passages, and unknown to them Taylor had been at work in another; of how he had blown up the part under the tanks, presumably in an endeavour to drown them out, lest they might forestall him in whatever he was looking for; of how they had found him later and done their best to bring him to; of their failure, and of how they had sent Sayyid Ali to get Carlos and the car over.

Stella listened to it, wondering the while. So much what she would have expected from the man she thought she had seen. Absolutely ruthless where his own interests were concerned, ready to sacrifice any one and every one for his own profit or his own pleasure, as she had learnt in two years of hell. Every moment it seemed the more certain that her impression that night had been correct, that here in this forgotten fortress in the shadow of the great gate and under the spiring tower where she and Paul had passed such a perfect day, they would come to the end of the road, and learn what Fate had in store.

She turned to Carlos sitting a little apart from the other three.

"Carlos," she said in a low voice—the others were still discussing Taylor's probable motives,—“I want you to take me across to the other camp now. I don't want any one to come but you. I'll explain to you as we go over. Paul will understand and keep the

others here if you say that you and I are going over."

Carlos, more than ever convinced that Stella was "off her rocker," as he would have termed it, could not get away from the quiet insistence of her voice, nor the repressed emotion that lay behind it, though what the cause might be he had not the least idea. But he stood up and told the others that he and Stella were going over to Taylor's camp, and would be back before long. And he said it so that they could not fail to see that his words were a definite invitation to them not to come.

"You'd better take a lamp with you," said Monocloid. "The path's a bit bad in places."

"There's a lamp in the tent," said Paul quietly, "and there's moon enough to see the way. You can't miss it, straight over the wall by that little domed building there, and then you'll see the light below you. My bearer is there. We didn't like the looks of Taylor's servant overmuch."

Then as she walked with Carlos, Stella gave him her real story, told quickly, in brief sentences, of how she had found that her husband had not been killed; of how she had kept the knowledge to herself until she could be sure; of her difficulty in getting news; of how by degrees suspicion had become certainty. Then she told him of the glimpse of the man in the tonga on Sunday night, and the consequent reason for her insistence on accompanying him and Mainwaring to-night.

She did not tell him much of the last year, but Carlos understood, realised now why she and Paul had not "brought it off," and realising wondered, and wondering admired, as Carlos always did admire any one who played the game, even if he did not sympathise with their view of the rules. He knew Stella's idea on marriage and divorce—had often argued them with her in his good-natured materialistic way.

"Poor old Stella," he said at last. "I didn't know

you had such a rotten time. You're a good sort to hang on like that."

And Stella felt that he had understood all that she hadn't told him, realised something of the struggle, and was grateful to him for his words. He and Marjorie had always been the best of friends to her, and she had a very weak spot in her heart for this quiet, understanding, cheerful man, who was always so thoughtful where others were concerned.

The light of Taylor's camp showed below them now, and they followed the little winding track down the hill, Stella clinging to Carlos' arm, glad for the excuse of the stony path, with its sudden dips and snags, to be able to cling to him. There was something about his quiet strength which lent her confidence, for she was not looking forward to the coming interview.

"Just wait an instant, Stella," he said, as they reached the tent; and Paul's bearer, sitting by the door, got up to see who it was, salaamed to Carlos, and spoke a word or two to him and Stella.

Carlos entered the tent, and Stella stood there in the moonlight waiting with a mind incapable of thinking any more, only praying for the suspense to be over quickly one way or the other. Then Carlos came to the door again.

"Would you like me to stay with you, Stella, or shall I wait outside?"

"No, stop please—just stop by the door," she whispered, as she entered the little tent, with the piled-up boxes, the small table heaped with oddments, the camp-bed whereon lay that still figure near whose head Carlos had thoughtfully placed the lamp. They had laid him out carefully, smoothed the reddish hair and straightened the limbs, drawn the sheets up to the thin chin.

And so Stella looked again at the man who had spoilt such of her life as she had given into his keeping, and tarnished for her all the years after she had left him. Yes, her hasty glimpse that night had told her the truth; her first impression had been the correct one.

Quite apart from any question of the struggle she had been going through, it was easier to meet him thus. The silence and the loneliness of death robbed the meeting of its possibilities of rancour. The man she knew had gone, leaving only just the outer shell, impassive and voiceless, something that could be neither blamed nor hated. Yes, it was better so that she should see him thus, even though she knew that his last conscious act had been one designed, though all unknown to him, to deprive her of the one chance of happiness that had come into her life.

She looked down on the quiet face, the closed sunken eyes, the still lips that once had been so much to her, and that later she had come to hate for their falseness. The dim light of the hurricane lamp took away from the harshness of the rather drawn features, the lines about the eyes were softened now with the shadows of death; it was some one almost different who lay there, although it was indubitably the same.

She wondered where the real Taylor had gone; what road was he following now; had he perhaps got another chance to straighten things out, to make good somewhere else with a little more light, a little less bias? She hoped so. Life must have been hell for him too very often, unless all the better part had been entirely crushed out of existence; and in the early years she had used to think sometimes that there were faint glimmerings of a better self, something more than the man she had come to know too well.

There was no tiniest vestige of tenderness or affection left in her for him; that had died at his hands years—or was it centuries?—ago. But she looked upon him now dispassionately, and with the natural tenderness that was in her always for any who suffered, since she had learnt so well what suffering meant; she hoped, and the hope was an unformulated prayer, that somewhere beyond he might in time find peace.

Then she turned to Carlos standing at the door. "It was my husband, Carlos," and she said it calmly, the

unconscious use of the past tense marking the definite closing of that chapter of her life. Then she went out of the tent, and Carlos followed her, walking in silence, glad for Stella's sake that new life might open to her. Carlos was quick of thought for all his deliberate manner, and the word or two that she had said about the last twelve months had told him all a story about her and Paul.

Then as they reached the wall and saw in the distance the light of Monocloid's camp, she stopped.

"I don't want to go back there just now, Carlos. I'd like to walk over to the Tower of Victory. Will you come along with me, and then send Paul over and tell him what has happened? He knows everything except who Taylor was."

So with the first faint light of the true dawn just paling the sky, that last moment of night when, as the Koran says, "The faithful scarce distinguish a black hair from a white," they walked across the ruins to where the Tower of Victory stood outlined against the setting moon, and there Carlos left Stella alone with her thoughts and her hopes as he went back to the tents.

"Where's Stella?" asked Paul, as he reached them. And there was something of fear in his voice—fear lest she should have suffered again, learnt something new and unsuspected, something evil perhaps.

"Over there by the tower," said Carlos quietly. "Come along with me a moment, Paul." Then he turned to the other two. "Back in a second."

"What's happened, Carlos?" Paul stepped out alongside of him with suspense knocking at his heart. "Did she recognise Taylor? Who is he?"

Then Carlos stopped, out of earshot of the camp.

"Yes; she recognised him, and told me to tell you. He was her husband. She's waiting for you now by the tower. Fate's been very good to you both, and you've earned it."

And with that, honest Carlos turned back towards the camp, leaving Paul standing there in the dawn light.

The first rose-flush of dawn suffused the eastern sky as the sound of footsteps on the stones came to the ears of the woman sitting there in the shadow of the great tower, a pale ivory pillar against the blue of the moonlit western sky above her, and she turned so that the morning light made a glory about her face, turned to meet the man who limped towards her in his stained khaki shooting-kit, his frayed stockings, and worn chaplis.

And in his face also there was a quiet glory, the reflection of what he had been through in his efforts to play the game even as she had done—a glory that shone through the dust and stains of the long road which were fading even now as he and she met where the hill-paths lead up to the flower-strewn valleys of delight, the valleys that they had once thought were only to be found in infinity, but which all unexpected had been opened to them here and now for all time.

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